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THRILLING WONDER STORIES

Vol. XXIX, No. 2

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

December, 1946



A Complete Fantastic Novel

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By HENRY KUTTNER

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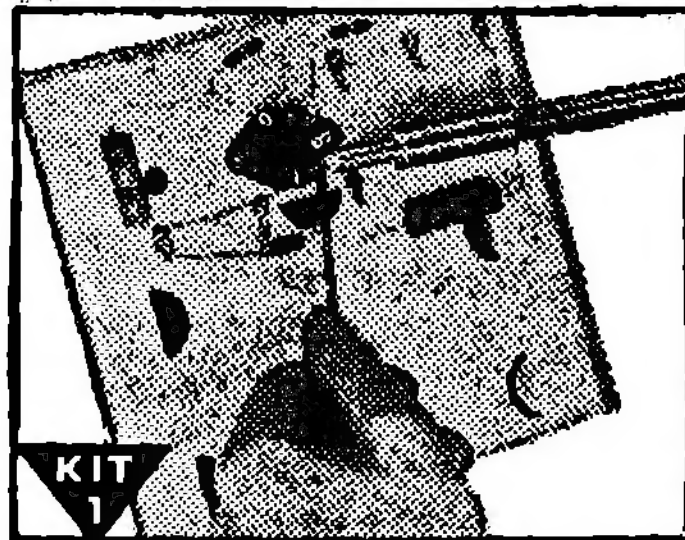
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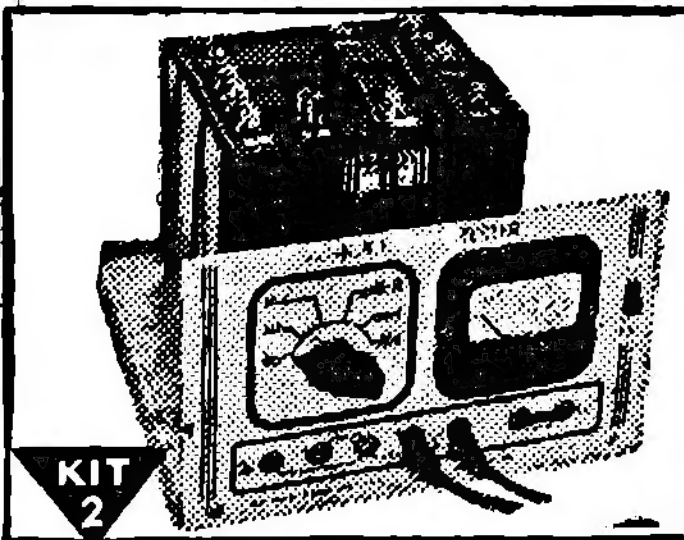


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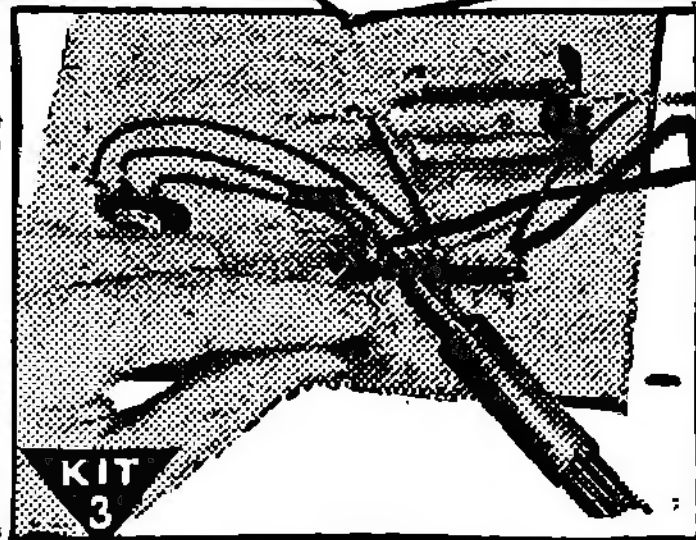
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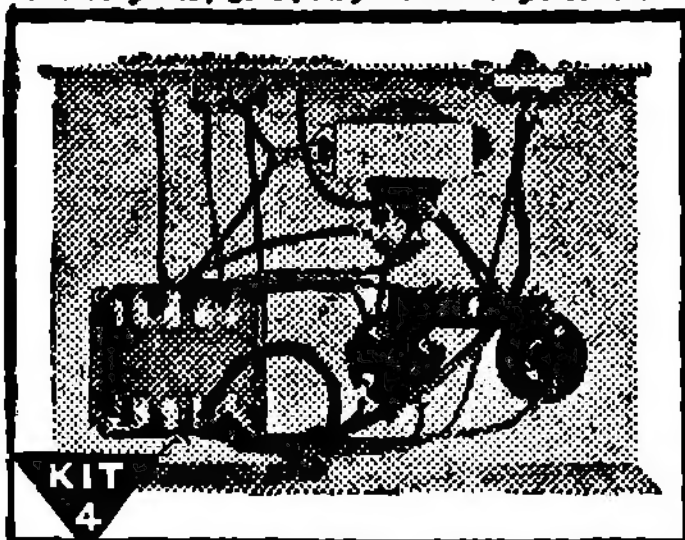
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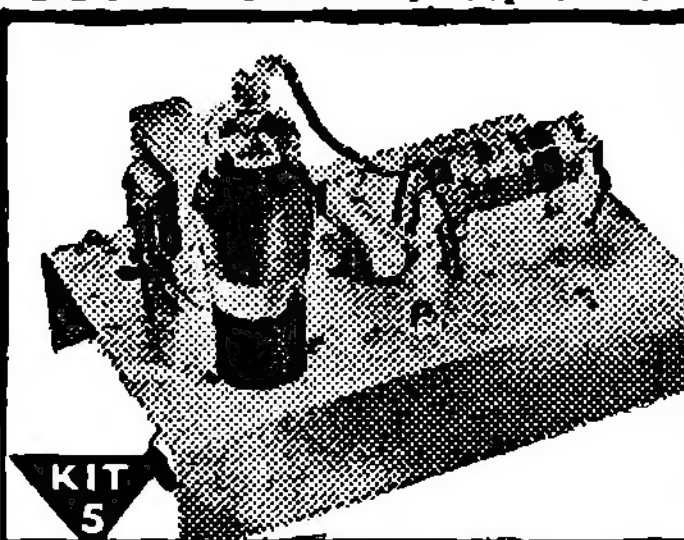
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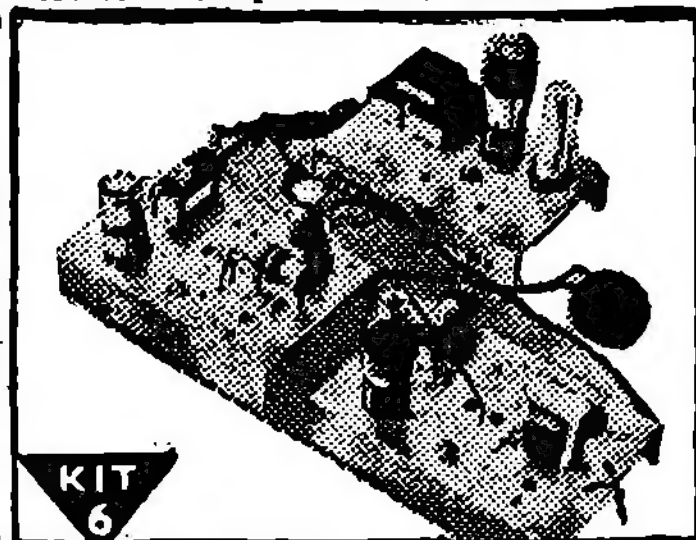
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YOUR irascible correspondent—and probably about time too—has been giving a great deal of thought recently to the imminence of space travel. Since recent radar experiments give reason to think that beamed travel beyond the Earth's atmosphere is at least a possibility, and since sooner or later atomic power, if not some new sort of rocket fuel, must eventually be realized to power such missions, it seems probable that man is about to take off from his home planet for the first time in known history.

Undoubtedly, a long road still remains unopened before travelers may leave the Earth for planets known or unknown with a reasonable assurance of returning in one undamaged piece. However, the elements for interplanetary travel now seem within human grasp. Sooner or later, such travel is going to be a *fait accompli*—and it may well come within the lifetime of those who are reading these lines. It may come in a matter of a few years or decades.

New Worlds

However, the mere fact of space travel is not what has roused the Sarge's interest. What has stirred him are the potential effects of the opening of new worlds upon life on this strife-torn globe.

The present world-picture is scarcely a heartening one. The promises of a mechanized Utopia which cheery prophets and other advertising promotion artists painted so alluringly during the recent war years have vanished a lot faster and more completely than the proverbial snows of yesteryear.

In fact, things look pretty grim. The world is not only overpopulated, but is so torn with ideological, economic and other

strife that it seems bent upon self-destruction or something close to it.

This, however, is hardly a new condition for the poor old world. Back in the days when the Middle Ages threatened to reduce western and central Europe to a shambles of petty princes and starved populations, Constantinople fell to the Turks and the Renaissance restored a semblance of big-time existence to the harassed populations.

When the Renaissance began to fade, the opening up of the Americas brought vast fortunes to Spain and Portugal and, through them, to much of the Continent. Ultimately, the Western Hemisphere was to represent an apparently inexhaustible funnel through which surplus populations could be poured.

In this country, the discovery of gold in California pulled us out of one of the most hopeless depressions in our history and which Andrew Jackson had failed to stem. Later, the great leap in industrialization was to do the same for the depression of 1873-79, while discoveries of precious metals in Alaska and the Klondike helped gloss over subsequent lesser panics.

The Conquest of Space

Somehow, it seems almost certain to the Sarge that man is not only going to conquer space but is going to find some sort of new frontier on one or more of the adjacent planets. It is going to be an extremely rugged business, of course. A lot of pioneers are going to die before a landing is made on either Mars or Venus and a lot more are going to die there before anyone gets back.

But the human critter is an adventurous one when rewards either for ideals or the pocketbook is in sight. It seems highly unlikely that the ultimate pioneers will meet

(Continued on page 8)



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THE READER SPEAKS

(Continued from page 6)

any conditions which a science that has conquered the atom itself will not be able to master or neutralize.

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OUR NEXT ISSUE

THAT very considerable proportion of our readers who felt that Murray Leinster's recent short novel, **THE DISCIPLINARY CIRCUIT**, was all too short and should have been carried on to full novel length should be delighted to know that a sequel to this highly successful science fiction venture entitled **THE MANLESS WORLDS** will carry on the intergalactic adventures of Kim Rendell and his Dona in the forthcoming appearance of **THRILLING WONDER STORIES**.

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Co-attraction with **THE MANLESS WORLDS** is a brilliant novelet of the decadence which must always attack a Utopia, **THE PLEASURE AGE**, by Joed Cahill. This tells the story of a human race which, having conquered all the enemies within its sight—to paraphrase Lord Geoffery Amherst—has ceased to look around for more when it is through.

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(Continued on page 99)

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Ferguson raced after the girl and Jacklyn who were running like the wind toward the entrance of the valley

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By HENRY KUTTNER

In a fabulous Brazilian Valley, Jim Ferguson and Dr. Cairns battle against walking rocks and cannibal plants in their strange quest of a mysterious and fascinating girl goddess!

CHAPTER I

Haunted Dutchman

A WARM wind blew down the brown waters of the Parima. It picked up the sweet, clinging scent of honeysuckle and carried it across the open ver-

anda. Watching the Dutchman's face, Ferguson felt a queer crawling unease.

Groot's nostrils twitched. He put out a thick hand beaded with diamonds of perspiration and lifted his glass. But he did not gulp the gin this time. He inhaled deeply, his eyes closed, and once a tiny shudder rippled across his pulpy, big torso.

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"De smell was dere, too," Groot said. "De *sina-sina* trees—dey have big, nasty t'orns—perhaps dey were de worst. But *all* de flowers watched. And dey smelled."

Ferguson let his dark gaze slide toward the bambo screens at the back of the porch. He thought he saw a faint movement there, and moved his hand surreptitiously in warning. The motion stopped. Luckily Groot was too drunk to be suspicious, or he might have heard the heavy breathing behind the screens.

"The flowers smelled," Ferguson prompted. "You must have got used to smells in the Amazon, though."

Groot put down the glass and mopped his swarthy face.

"Dere are sins and sins," he said. "I have broken my share of de commandments, *ja*. But dis was different. All along I was afraid, and de feeling got worse on de way back. De doctor had his scientific zeal; he could look at her as a specimen. Yet he was troubled too. Me—I could feel de way de forest stopped when we caught her."

"Indios?" Ferguson suggested. Groot made a gesture of scorn.

"De Indios! Oh, no—it was not de brown savages. I know dem. Dey could not frighten me so I sweated and felt my insides try to crawl down into my shoes. It was like de way life stops when you stab a man. Only it did not quite stop."

Again the perfumed wind crossed the veranda; again Groot shivered. Ferguson refilled the Dutchman's glass.

"T'anks. Look, now—you are a scientist. I am not one. I just bum around Brazil, making a few *reis* here, a few dere. I am not educated. But I am not superstitious either. Dis talk about haunted parts of de forest—well, I have gone to such places, and dere is nothing. Only de Indians do not talk about dis place, and dey do not go dere. Twenty years ago dey did. Suddenly something happened." He moved nervously. "I do not want to talk about it or think about it. I am afraid. I have a feeling I should go back and try to help dat girl. Dis sin lies heavy on my soul, you see."

He lurched to his feet. "I go to my hammock now. No more gin, no. I have had enough."

FERGUSON was silent. Groot walked carefully to the steps. There he turned.

"De rocks shook," he said. "I felt de

ground crawl under my feet. And de flowers—"

He stopped, chewing his lip. Shaking his head, he shrugged and stepped off the veranda. Jim Ferguson watched the bulky figure disappear in the direction of the settlement. He finished his gin and scowled, distracted by the overpoweringly sweet scent of the *madreselva*, the river honeysuckle, that lined the Parima's banks. Finally he rubbed his unshaven jaw and called:

"Come on out. You make enough noise to scare the Dutchman away, and then go to sleep when he's gone. Afraid I'll go after the stuff without you?"

Tom Parry came from behind the screens, a thin, wiry, sneering man with a knife-scar across one cheek.

"Maybe," he said. "I never trust gentlemen. It's a habit with me."

"I'm flattered," Ferguson said, pouring himself another drink. "Where's Sampson?"

"Here," Sampson said, following Parry. He was a squat, dark man who spoke little but apparently heard everything. He drew back a chair and sat down, reaching for the bottle.

Parry's gray eyes were on Ferguson. "Well?"

Ferguson grinned. "Well what? We won't get any more information out of Groot. He just repeats himself now."

Parry grimaced. "What are we waiting for then?"

"Nothing. We can go up river tomorrow, if you want."

"What about the lead suits?"

Ferguson shrugged. "Dr. Cairns has a couple. He must have known what to expect. Lead-impregnated cloth—it's significant. But now we won't have to wait. It would take weeks to get down to Manaos and back, and somebody might ask questions. We'll use Cairns' lead suits."

"That'll protect us from the radium?"

"Yes," Ferguson said, grinning again. "It won't protect us against other emanations, though—there may be some mighty peculiar radiations in Groot's haunted forest."

"There's radium, anyhow," Sampson said curtly.

"Yeah," Parry agreed. "If Groot doesn't lead us to the place, I figure the girl will. What's the Dutchman afraid of—ghosts?"

"His conscience," Ferguson said. "Everybody's got an Achilles heel somewhere. Mine didn't happen to be the same kind, but—"



Shrieking like a lost soul, Perry launched himself at the dread flow on the wall of crystal

Parry said maliciously, "That's why you're floating around Brazil, with a couple of crooks like us, instead of being a big-shot metallurgist in New York, isn't it?"

The barb did not sting. Ferguson turned his quiet, dark gaze on Parry.

"That's right," he agreed. "It's lucky for you that I know radium when I see it."

"Ten grand," Sampson said. Parry grunted.

"We can get ten million. Besides, Groot gave the stuff to the local padre to keep for him. It's safer than a bank in this neck of the woods. We daren't touch it."

It was safe, yes. Ferguson had warned the priest to keep the radioactive ore in its lead-en casket. Why Groot hadn't continued down river to Manaus or Rio was something to ponder. It was almost, Ferguson thought, as though some intangible cord still bound the Dutchman to that strange, fantastic part of the forest where he had found—what he found.

Ferguson sighed and watched the slow, roiling flow of the river. Up there, somewhere, was Dr. Andrew Cairns, possessor of a secret that Groot could not disclose. For the Dutchman had suffered an emotional shock that partook of psychic trauma; he had stumbled over the threshold of the unknown, and for a little while he had walked in an alien place. A place where the ground crawled beneath his feet, and the rocks shook, and the flowers watched.

No man can ever shut the door completely on the past. Though Ferguson had been drifting for five years now, without ambition and without hope, something of the old driving curiosity came back now. The radium deposit Groot described would be worth a rather incredible amount, but the money took second place in Jim Ferguson's mind to the boundless mystery he sensed up river. Rudderless, he moved before a familiar wind that blew toward the shores of a haunting conundrum.

And from upstream the hot wind of Brazil blew steadily, moist with the sickly flower-fragrance.

"We'll have our guns," Ferguson said suddenly.

SURPRISED, Parry stared at him. "Sure. Why? Getting worried?"

"I don't know," Ferguson whispered, feeling again the sickly unease Groot's words had brought. "Could be, Parry. Could be. You see, Groot hasn't told us everything he

saw or—sensed. I'm no psychologist, but I could tell that. Part of his mind, out there, wouldn't let him see some of the things that happened. And as long as those things didn't impinge on him personally, he could ignore them."

Parry was puzzled.

"I don't get it."

Ferguson nodded toward the blue, hazed ramparts of the Serra Pacaranua, a veiled wall above and beyond the jungle.

"If those mountains got up and walked past us and disappeared beyond the horizon, it would be so absolutely unthinkable that your mind might not let you admit that you saw it. Because if you *did* realize that mountains walked, you'd be apt to go crazy. An automatic defense mechanism of the subconscious."

"Mountains walking!" Sampson mouthed contemptuously. "The gin's talking."

Yet Parry's gray gaze held steady, a little wary.

"What d'you think Groot saw up there?" he asked.

"I don't know," Ferguson said. "I don't know. Maybe—mountains walking. . . ."

* * * * *

Five days by *canoe*, three afoot, and they were at their destination, in the foothills of Serra Pacaranua's mighty peaks. Groot came with them. Ferguson thought the Dutchman's conscience had forced him to return. Groot spoke seldom now. His heavy face was perceptibly thinner, and nervous tension made him jumpy. Oddly, the same subtle ailment had set its stamp on Dr. Andrew Cairns—which made Ferguson's thoughts turn in new directions.

Cairns had occupied the wreckage of an experimental station that had once existed here. Native labor had rebuilt it, and the result was better than Ferguson would have expected. But a heavy silence hung over the compound; the usual soft chatter of the Indios wasn't audible. Parry felt that, too, and loosened the pistol at his belt. Sampson trudged doggedly ahead, a blocky, unimaginative figure, feeling nothing of the subtle currents of strain that surrounded the clearing. And sweat was pouring down the Dutchman's face.

The door opened; a tall, gray-haired man in dungarees and singlet stood on the threshold, a rifle held at the ready. He relaxed at sight of them, Ferguson thought, but the strained wariness did not entirely vanish.

He waited quietly as the little group marched forward.

"Doctor Cairns," Groot said hesitantly. "I have come back—dere was something—"

A look passed between the two men. Cairns said, "She's still here, Jan."

"Dere has been—no trouble, Doctor?"

Cairns studied Groot. Abruptly he slung the rifle so that its muzzle pointed at the ground. "Come inside," he said. "It's cooler. Bring your friends, Jan—and introduce us."

The interior was shadowed and as cool as could be expected. Cairns indicated chairs and busied himself getting drinks. Ferguson followed Groot's gaze and saw a heavy door with a business-like hasp and padlock newly affixed to it.

"No ice," Cairns said. "There was a generator here twenty years ago, but the Indios dismantled it long ago. Incidentally, they ran away last week, Jan."

"So. Well—dis is Mr. Ferguson. Mr. Parry and Mr. Sampson. Dey—dey asked me to guide dem—" Groot stumbled.

Mild amusement showed in the doctor's eyes. "I suppose I was too generous. If I hadn't given you that radium sample—but I felt you'd earned it—"

"You've guessed it, Doctor," Parry said. "Do you mind telling me if there's more radium where that came from?"

"There is more. And I haven't staked out a claim."

"Why not?" Sampson asked.

Cairns didn't answer. The Dutchman stabbed a hairy finger toward the locked door.

"Is *she* in dere?"

Cairns nodded. "Yes, Jan. I've been giving her hypnotics ever since you left. She's been unconscious."

"She?" Ferguson said. "I'm a little curious. Who is she?"

CAIRNS reached out a long arm and picked up a flat metal case. He opened it, revealing a medical kit—a professional man's kit.

"I'm glad you came, he said. "I haven't slept for days. For weeks—I don't know how long. I was afraid I'd have to kill her, and I wasn't sure I *could*. Because I don't dare let her wake up."

He thrust the box at Ferguson, who automatically accepted it.

"Kill her?" Ferguson asked, and Parry echoed him.

"I'll show you how to use a hypodermic—

I've been using apomorphine, a strong shot."

"I know how," Ferguson said.

"Good," Cairns muttered, not even showing surprise. "Fill it up to here . . . whenever she shows signs of waking . . . don't let her wake up. I've got to sleep a little."

Sheer physical exhaustion suddenly drained the life out of the man's face. He slumped bonelessly in his chair, as though only force of will had kept him awake till now.

"Doctor?" Groot said.

"Later," Cairns whispered. "Tell you—later. Only—Jan, don't take chances. Keep her under. Last time—mistake . . . Don't. . . ." His voice faded.

He slept.

"This is plain crazy," Sampson said.

Ferguson was examining the bottle.

"He's used up most of his benzedrine supply," Ferguson said. "I wonder how long he's been awake, anyhow?"

Parry said, "Who cares? I'm wondering if he's got any more radium around the place. Here!" He went swiftly to the unconscious doctor's body and began searching Cairns' pockets.

"He wouldn't keep it in his pockets," Ferguson grunted.

"No, but he'd keep the key to that room."

"It is in de lock," Groot said. He was at the padlocked door, staring at the heavy wood panel as though hoping to pierce its solidity. When Parry turned the key, Ferguson half expected the Dutchman to object, but Groot made no move, though a slight shiver shook the gross body.

Parry swung the door open, stepped over the threshold—and his footsteps paused. His voice came back.

"What the devil! Sampson—Ferguson! C'mere!"

CHAPTER II

Escape

THEY all came, crowding into the bare little room. There was little to see. Through a grimy window light came faintly. And on an army cot lay a girl, wrapped in an old flannel bathrobe. She was bound, slim wrist and ivory ankle, by thin, strong ropes.

She slept. Tiny marks on her bare arm told Ferguson where the hypodermic needle had gone in.

This was no Indian girl. Her hair was pure silver, not with age, for it was silky and sleek, but with the cool shine of polished spun metal. Utter relaxation was in the abandon of her posture, even trussed as she was. Her skin was a luminous white, faintly tinged with a darker tone beneath—like thin ivory against the light.

"Do you feel it?" Groot whispered.

"Feel what?" Parry asked sharply.

"De—whatever it is. I don't know! Only dis is wrong. She does not belong here. It was a sin to take her out of de forest." Groot stumbled forward and stood looking down at the girl. "A sin," he mouthed. "De earth is her mother—we took her from de earth. Wake up!" he cried suddenly, his big hands closing on the girl's shoulders. He shook her gently. "Wake up! You lie dere as if you were dead—I can't have it."

The cloudy lashes quivered. Instinctively every man in the room shrank back—for a sound had come from outside the house. It was horribly human, but Ferguson had heard the cry of *jaguara* before.

Something crashed against the house door. There was a ripping, tearing noise, and again that furious screaming sounded. With a swift, easy movement Sampson darted into the next room; he didn't seem chunky and awkward any more. He picked up Cairns' rifle and moved out of Ferguson's range of vision.

The girl's eyes opened. They were intensely black. Pupil merged with jet iris.

Again the door shook; again that wailing scream ripped out.

"Parry!" Sampson yelled. "There's a couple more of the big cats coming!" The rifle blasted. The jaguar's death cry was swallowed by a heavier crash against the door.

"They don't act like that—unless they're goaded," Parry said. He stared at the girl, hesitated, cursed, and whirled toward the outer room.

Expressionless, lovely, and withdrawn, the girl lay waiting. Groot wrung his big hands, making helpless sounds. Ferguson stared at him.

"Jan! Come on. We've got to drive those cats away."

Groot gripped Ferguson's arm. "It is no use. She will only call more."

"You're crazy!"

"I don't know what to do," the Dutchman faltered. She—she will kill us all—she's bringing *jaguara* here."

"How could she?"

"Ask him," Groot said. He pointed to the doorway. "Ask him. He knows!"

Dr. Cairns stood there, his eyes dull, a loaded syringe in his hand. His teeth showed in a mirthless grin.

"Wrong time for me to fall asleep," he said—and a jaguar screamed outside the house as Sampson's rifle snarled.

Ferguson stared. Cairns hurried toward the cot. The girl did not look at him as he punched a fold of her skin and sank the needle into the ivory flesh of her arm.

"You'll kill her!" Ferguson said.

"No," Cairns said. "Not *her*. She'll just sleep longer. And as long as she's awake, we're not safe. Watch and listen."

The rifle boomed again; the sharper crack of the pistol sounded. The shrieking of the big cats rose to a pitch of blind fury. A great body hurled itself against the door with a splitting of wood.

The screaming died.

Ferguson looked at the girl. The jet eyes were closed.

"We've licked the brutes!" Parry yelled. "They're getting out of here fast!"

"She sleeps," Groot said thickly.

"This is the third time it's happened," Cairns said.

Ferguson frowned at him. "But who is she? *What* is she?"

"Call her Circe," Cairns said.

He staggered back through the doorway, threw himself across the cot and fell asleep again.

The doctor slept without stirring for six hours. Ferguson waited, the medical kit ready, but there was no further disturbance. Once he thought he heard a stirring from behind the locked door, and got up to investigate, but the girl had not moved. Parry and Sampson took cat-naps, while Groot vanished into the night, muttering vague phrases.

BEFORE dawn, in the fresh, gray coolness, Cairns and Ferguson drank strong black coffee and talked. Parry and Sampson still lay on their cots, but Ferguson did not believe they were asleep.

"I'm glad you came," Cairns said. "I'd probably have gone mad here by myself. With *her*. That trauma you mentioned?" Ferguson had spoken of his impression of Groot's psychic bloc. "Yes, it's possible. In the forest there were some strange things,

and I've an idea I don't remember everything that happened."

"Groot spoke of flowers—and stones."

"Yes," Cairns said, "I suppose he did. My own theory—" He hesitated. "It's hard to explain. Over twenty years ago a group of scientists—came here—built this station—to experiment with atomic power. They failed, and went back. But one of them stayed, a physicist named Bruce Jacklyn. His wife came up here to join him. And, after a while, they went further into the forest, with some Indios. They never came back."

"You think Jacklyn found—whatever it is?"

"No," Cairns said, "I think he *made* it. Even today we don't know much about atomic power. Wave-lengths, vibration, quanta—we can tie them in with radioactivity and life energy. I think Jacklyn stumbled on something quite incredible. I haven't any idea what it was—or is. But I've seen some of the results. A force that can create nebulae, that can create life—or develop it—can do wonders. Mr. Ferguson, do you know what causes mutations?"

"Well, hard radiations can do it."

"Working on germ plasm. But imagine something a million times more powerful, an energizing force locked in the heart of the atom, a magic wand that can create mutations not only among humans, but among—"

He paused. Ferguson said softly, "Plants?"

"Stones," Cairns said, his eyes bright and blind. "I can't remember . . . now—but once I remembered. Once I saw it. A super-race . . . but not quite that—I don't know." The look faded. "I've found Jacklyn's diary. He left it here before he went into the forest with his wife. It doesn't tell much. But there's a little. His wife was expecting a child."

Ferguson glanced toward the locked door. "You think—?"

"She's no Indio. I'm not sure she's even human, now. A mutation, perhaps the highest type of human ever to be born on earth so far. You saw the power she has over beasts. I suppose a super-being would have that power."

"She can't control humans, though."

"No. Though—well, she can, a little. It's



In the doorway of the house, between pillars with a tracery of stone flowers, stood the girl, watching them with a bright black stare.

a subtle matter. More than once I've felt a nearly irresistible impulse to let her go. I've kept her doped partly because of that; I don't trust myself."

"You can't keep her here forever. Besides, what about the legal aspects? Not to mention the moral ones!"

Cairns tightened his mouth. "If I let her go now, she'd never come back. We trapped her, Groot and I, because she didn't expect it. It wouldn't work twice. Ferguson, I can't even tell you some of the powers she has; you wouldn't believe me. It would be a crime to let her go now."

"Maybe it's a crime to keep her."

Cairns didn't hear.

"If I can get her back to civilization, away from these animal friends of hers, teach her English, we might learn much. She's intelligent enough, I'm sure. Whatever Jacklyn discovered, it shouldn't be lost to the world. A method of artificial mutation—a new race of supermen, perhaps—eugenes would probably be the science. If you found a million tons of—well, if you found the Fountain of Youth, wouldn't you want the world to know about it?"

"Perhaps," Ferguson said. "You don't remember what's out there?"

The doctor rubbed his forehead. "I'm not sure. I—ah, well," He stood up. "I'm going to find Groot. See you later." He went out.

"Crackpot," Sampson said.

Ferguson smiled. "Think so? Here, have some coffee. No use playing possum any longer. What did you hope to find out?"

Both Sampson and Parry rose from their cots and accepted the coffee Ferguson poured.

"The doc's an educated man and so are you," Parry said. "I figured he'd talk more to you than to us, that's all."

Sampson examined his pistol. "Those jaguars were hungry. They smelled grub."

But Parry seemed less certain.

"Look, Ferguson. D'you think there's anything in what Cairns was saying?"

"Frankly, I don't know. He can't even describe what he saw, you know. It might have been something so impossible that his subconscious won't let him remember."

"D'you think he knows what we're after?"

FERGUSON smiled at this question and nodded.

"Of course," he said. "He's not a complete fool. He simply isn't interested in the radium. It isn't his line."

"There won't be any—trouble?"

"Not with Cairns. I'm sure of that."

"So'm I," Sampson said, reholstering the pistol. His hand stayed near the flap as Dr. Cairns hurried into the room, his tired face drained paper-white.

The doctor went directly to the locked door and opened it. Parry exchanged puzzled glances with Ferguson. Then the two men got up and followed Cairns. Sampson remained where he was, his cold eyes watchful.

Cairns had got the door open at last. Over his shoulder Ferguson could see the cot—empty—with cut ropes coiling on the blanket. The window was open.

The rigidity went out of Cairns' figure. Ferguson saw him slump. He reached out, but the doctor straightened again, his mouth twisting.

"That crazy Dutchman!" he forced out.

"What's happened?" Ferguson said. But he had already guessed the answer.

"When I was outside, I noticed somebody'd opened that window," Cairns said. "Groot must have done it last night sometime. The girl woke up."

He turned. "If he's gone off without a protective suit, he's finished. Blasted fool!"

Cairns stepped into the outer room. Parry moved closer to Ferguson.

"So the Dutchman's taken a powder, eh? With the girl?"

"Looks like it."

"Who'll guide us now?"

Without answering Ferguson followed Cairns. The doctor had opened a tall cupboard and was examining folds of darkish fabric hanging within.

"He took one of 'em all right. I'm not going to let him get away with this! The biggest thing man ever stumbled upon—and one man's sentimentality throwing it away forever! Pah!" Cairns pulled out one of the shapeless cloaks and began folding it into a neat bundle.

"What are you going to do?" Parry asked softly.

"I'm going after him," Cairns snapped. "I'm going to bring the girl back!"

"Better take your hypo along," Sampson suggested, reaching for the medical kit.

"Yeah," Parry said. "And don't forget Groot's got a gun."

"So have I," Cairns growled.

"Mind if we go along?" Parry asked. "You may need some help."

The doctor hesitated. His eyes were troubled.

"Listen," he said at last, "You can come if you want. The radium's there; I don't want the stuff. I just want the girl. But it'll be dangerous. I've enough material for suits for all of you, but radium burns aren't the only things that could happen. You'll have to decide for yourselves."

Ferguson let his gaze slide from one face to another. In Sampson's and Parry's he read only greed and wariness. In Cairns was a deep, troubling fear, veiled by the man's burning fixity of purpose. Of the four, Cairns was the only one who had been into the unknown country. And he could not quite remember what he had seen there.

"If we can catch up with them fast, Groot will be burdened with the girl," the doctor said. "She won't recover from that last shot I gave her for quite a while. Once she wakes up it'll be harder." He picked up the medical kit. "Made up your minds?"

"Sure," Sampson said, and stood up. Parry merely nodded. Cairns looked at Ferguson.

"What about you?"

"I'll string along," Ferguson said. But a muscle at the corner of his jaw twitched uncontrollably.

As they packed, he wondered. He had too much imagination, that was the trouble. Years of drifting aimlessly had not entirely dulled the original keenness of his mind; he was still a scientist and a technician. In the safe, aseptic surroundings of a laboratory there wasn't much room for the unknown. Part of an equation might be lacking, or a chemical component. But in a lab you had control. Here, on the shadowed edge of the world, things went on happening without control, recklessly plunging ahead like one of the great rivers that rush down from the Andean summits.

Yes, he was afraid of what they might find. But he was too curious to turn back now.

They took only light field packs. And they went north, toward the high blue crags of the Serra. But they did not overtake Jan Groot.

CHAPTER III

Place Of Fantasy

WHEN they found him, he was not Jan Groot any longer. It was the morning

of the second day, and Cairns was growing obscurely restless, as a man might who is nearing things his conscious mind is too wise to let him remember clearly.

"I'm not sure," he said that morning after they had broken camp and started out along the barely perceptible trail through the jungle. "I *think* we're nearly there. But I can't remember any more. I thought I knew the way, but everything is so vague." He shook his head.

Sampson only plodded doggedly on, but Parry gave the doctor a cold, suspicious glance. Here, in the jungle, Ferguson was beginning to understand his companions more thoroughly than he had been able to understand them back at the outpost. There, they had been simple adventurers, not especially troubled by ethics, for ethics were excess baggage up the Amazonas. Parry was imaginative and therefore apt to be more dangerous; Sampson had a single-minded tenacity that could not be easily swayed.

Had the stakes been less, Ferguson might have taken precautions, but there were fortunes enough here for a hundred men. He wondered if there'd be enough radium to fill the makeshift lead-protected containers he had made. Even half filled—there would be enough!

No need to extract the element from pitchblende ore, either. Groot had said the stuff lay in plates over the rock. Fantastic—but Ferguson had seen the radium the Dutchman had brought back with him.

A pulse of excitement began to beat deep in his mind. This was the first chance for wealth he had discovered since he had gone adrift. Years of floating around the back country hadn't made him any softer. This time he'd redeem his fortunes.

Cairns asked him a question once, and Ferguson broke a long silence.

"You have your research, Doctor. I had my work once, too. Not any more. I'm after that radium, and nothing's going to stop me from getting it."

"Nothing? You're tempting the fates."

"I've learned how important money is," Ferguson said slowly, his jaw hardening. "More important than anything else. I'd face the devil himself now if necessary. I intend to go back to New York and—oh, a lot of things. But that'll come later."

"You're a technician—a metallurgist. You must know how unimportant such matters as an economic system are, Ferguson."

"Not to me. Not any more. Wealth is everything now."

They plodded on in silence, watchful, feeling the eyes of the jungle upon them. The eyes were knowing. It was a very curious feeling. Ferguson had never experienced it before—as if the trees and the rocks through which they passed were invested with a sentience that was almost reasoning, as if it was known all through the jungle where they were bound and why, and the jungle did not want them there.

Ferguson had heard sensitive men complain before now about the vast, unfeeling indifference of the forest to human suffering. He never had thought to walk through a forest whose menace was too close a focus of attention, a wilderness that watched without eyes and listened without ears to those who trod its ways.

The scent of wild honeysuckle was very strong.

It was Cairns who found Groot.

The big man lay crosswise of the trail they followed, half shrouded in a smother of vines and leaves so that they might have passed him by if the scientist's keen eye had not caught a glimpse of the Dutchman's blue shirt between the leaves.

They tried to pull the leaves away from him, though they knew from the way his body rolled when they tugged at it that he was dead. And the vines would not let him go.

"He's tied up," Sampson said. "She tied him in the vines and left him."

"Those lianas?" Cairns said. "No. Look." And he held back some of the leaves of the large vine.

They all looked, and Ferguson whistled a long soft note, and Parry, who did not believe in such things, had to turn away and go back a little down the trail.

For Groot had been crushed to death as by a boa constrictor, one of the great snakes of the Amazon that can wind its monstrous coils leisurely about a man and squeeze him into pulp. But the coils that had crushed Groot were the green coils of a vine. That was unmistakable. From thick stems as big as a man's wrist to tiny tendrils winding thinner than grass-blades about him, the vine had flung its deadly embrace about the man's body and tightened, tightened until breath stopped and bones gave way and the liana had sunk deep into Groot's flesh, killing him.

CAIRNS dropped the dead man's wrist. "Still warm," he said. "This must have happened lately. Not more than an hour ago, even in this heat."

"He was dead before it happened," Sampson said slowly, staring at Groot's suffused face. "He had to be! How could that thing grow around him if—if he'd been alive?"

Cairns answered almost casually.

"I hope you never find out, Sampson."

Ferguson looked at him. "This doesn't surprise you too much. Is it part of what you've—forgotten?"

"Maybe." Cairns stood up, his gaze searching the forest. "Yes, maybe it is."

"Are there many of them? Do the things—drop out of the trees? We've got to know what the danger is?"

"It depends on how near we are to the valley. I don't think we're in danger yet. It's only when *she's* near that things like this happen." His lips tightened as he looked down. "Poor sentimental fool! I warned him not to trust her."

Parry had come back.

"Look," he said abruptly. "The vine—" It was moving. Ferguson had his gun out almost before the first stir had breathed softly through the leaves, dreadfully as if Groot were coming to sluggish life among the coils of the thing that had killed him.

But there was nothing to shoot at. And it was the vine that stirred. A cluster of green buds was lifting itself on a slender stem, slowly, with a smooth motion a little like a snake's. Other clusters rose one by one among the leaves. The men watched silently.

A bud began to unfold, showing a fringe of blue inside the green. Another, and another. The vine bloomed as they stood there, too unsure to move. The whole process could not have taken more than ten minutes from the first rustle of motion to the last unfolding cluster. The vine lay there looking up at them, then, with cluster upon cluster of blue flowers, white-ringed, like blue eyes. The blue of Groot's eyes. . . .

Ferguson felt sweat trickle down his ribs. He had an unpleasant, illogical feeling that if Groot's eyes had been brown, these flowers would have unfolded brown centers to stare at them.

"Filthy thing!" Parry said. He kicked at the root of the thing. The leaves writhed away from his heavy boots and a few of the tendrils began to untwist and grope blindly in the air, like antennae.

Ferguson found where the brown stalk vanished underground. He pushed Parry roughly aside and with two blows of his machete severed the root. It writhed like a snake under the edge of the blade. And, cut, it began to wilt almost instantly. The leaves curled up, the blue flowers closed slowly. Ferguson felt obscurely as if he, and not the vine, had murdered Groot as he watched those impossibly familiar blue eyes fold shut.

They buried the Dutchman beside the trail.

"Do you want to go on?" Cairns asked them then.

They said that they did and again began to plod through the jungle. Men who are hungry for wealth can be very stubborn. . . .

"There it is," Cairns said on the third day, pausing at the head of a little valley and holding back a swinging branch to clear the view ahead. "There's the gate. Your radium's beyond, and my—my girl."

There was hate in his voice when he said that, and dread.

They went down the narrow cleft and across a grassy slope slowly, not sure what to expect. Serpent vines writhing at them out of the trees? Jaguars screaming as they sprang? Unguessable dangers lurking just within the opening?

Yet, after all, there was nothing. A low line of hills closed the end of the valley, leaving an arched cave-mouth open to the valley within. They could see greenery and sunlight through the short tunnel.

"Jacklyn's valley?" Ferguson asked. Cairns nodded.

"Yes. I remember about this part of it. Nothing wrong here. Jacklyn and his wife found the place, set up a station not far away. It was wild jungle then. It still is—with variations." He grimaced nervously.

"No, I don't remember after all. But I've got to go on in. If any of you want to change your minds, this is the time to do it."

He did not wait for an answer. He shifted his pack on his shoulders and marched forward with an almost somnambulistic directness. Ferguson kept close behind, though his stomach was tight with anticipation and his skin felt abnormally sensitive, as if it were trying to develop eye-cells all over to watch from every side. A man might have a thousand eyes here, and still not be wholly safe.

A BROAD flagged path led down from the cave opening, through flowering green trees toward a distant house half concealed among the leaves. The valley, glimpsed from its entrance here, dipped down in a gentle bowl and rose on the other side to lap the far line of hills with a tide of jungle. Except for the path and the house, there was no sign of human presence. But the valley itself looked odd. Ferguson blinked. It looked wrong. He stared. There was no breeze, but the jungle was in motion, subtle, undulating motion that not even a breeze would have wholly explained.

Sounds rose from it, too, sounds that Ferguson had never heard before.

Thin, sweet, ringing noises, a soft chattering that seemed almost to carry a tune. And once a deep sound, resonant, echoing, rolled through the jungle until the very earth seemed to vibrate underfoot. It might have been a jaguar roaring, but it sounded as if the earth itself had spoken with a hollow voice whose tones resounded through all the empty spaces of the underground.

"What's that?" Parry asked sharply.

"Echo," Ferguson said, when Cairns did not reply. "Maybe a big cat." [Turn page]



"You're crazy," Parry said. "I know what a jaguar sounds like. And that wasn't it."

Ferguson shrugged. Cairns raised his arm, pointing.

"This is where Groot and I stood," he said. "I remember now. That's the path we followed when we found—her. Jacklyn built that house and the path. He and his Indios, years ago. *She's* probably waiting for us."

"How would she know we followed?" Ferguson asked, staring at the distant house. Cairns grunted.

"How do you know when you stub your toe? The valley—she's a part of it. I remember!" His voice changed. "Outside, anywhere, she can summon the animals. Nearer to her own place—here—she can talk to the trees and vines. But in this valley—"

He gave Ferguson a blind, strange look and moved on down the path without finishing the sentence.

Ferguson followed, wondering a little about mutations. The scientist Jacklyn, working with forces too inconceivably vast to harness, setting free unknown radiations that must have flickered through the jungle like heat-waves, striking the encircling hills and echoing back again until everything in the valley was saturated with a power that could twist germ-plasm out of its time-accustomed paths, and produce—what? Anything. Anything at all. Animate vines—or—or vegetable animals!

What had become of Jacklyn, his wife, his Indios? Hard radiations could kill. Had the child, the girl, growing up in the midst of that furnace-hot cauldron of intangible waves, been the only human creature who survived? And if that were true, what unimaginable changes had the forces wrought upon her? Not only to the eye—her hair and her eyes and her pale ivory skin were strange enough—but inwardly, and mentally, and in other ways one could not even guess?

A small animal dropped from a tree and scurried up the path before them, curiously unafraid.

It looked like a squirrel, thought there was an odd tinge of green to its brown coat when the wind ruffled it.

Sampson, who was nearest the edge of the road, snatched out his revolver, a light calibered weapon, and threw a quick shot after the little beast.

"Fresh meat," he said briefly.

The bullet took the small greenish thing dead-center. It catapulted head over heels

down the road with the momentum of its flight.

Then—Ferguson's eyes widened—it picked itself up, shook its tail and scurried on, paying no attention to the men behind it. Dumbfounded, they paused in a group and watched the creature pounce upon a vine that lay looping out into the path. Its sharp teeth flashed. It severed the vine and a thin milky juice gushed from the cut end. The squirrel sucked greedily.

The vine gave a convulsive lunge and a great coil of it came down out of the masking underbrush to seize the squirrel in a green, serpentine embrace. There was an interval of violent activity. When it ended, the vine lay in sluggish, victorious folds about the animal, and a spray of cup-shaped flowers was creeping forward to fasten sucker-mouths upon the furry body.

Cautiously the men came nearer. The vine moved a little, but that was all. Machete poised, Ferguson bent. A shudder crawled down his spine, but he forced himself to touch the small animal's pelt.

He jumped back, his breath catching. It was quite impossible, of course!

Parry stared at him. "What's the matter?"

"Grass," Ferguson said unevenly. "I'll swear it's grass—not fur."

CAIRNS laughed without mirth.

"I remember," he said. "See the thing's tail? It isn't fur either, it's fern. Or it looks and feels like it, a big cluster of fern, adapted somehow. That isn't a squirrel anyhow. It isn't an animal. It's an adaptation, something like a tumbleweed a million times evolved. A plant that feeds on the juices of other plants—when it's lucky. No wonder the shot didn't hurt it! It hasn't any nervous system. Heaven knows how it does work inside."

"Let's go on to the house," Ferguson said grimly.

The building at the end of the path was very quiet amid its encircling trees. It was a stone house, they saw as they came nearer. Pale stone pillars supported a tiny portico, and the walls were great slabs of stone. The most curious aspect of the house was its elaborate carving of leaves and tendrils and flowers, twining over the pillars and adorning the walls and framing the windows in delicate traceries of stone.

"Indio work?" Parry asked. "The carving, I mean?"

Cairns chuckled harshly and kicked at something in the path before him.

"Look," he said. "Here's more—carving!" His boot lashed out again.

There was a long garland of the stone flowers lying across their path. Cairns trampled on it and kicked the splintered fragments away.

"The stuff *grows*," he muttered.

"Grows?" Ferguson said. "Not—but that's stone."

"I know. Stone evolving into plant, or maybe plant into stone. It grows, though. Groot and I—"

He paused suddenly, staring. Ferguson followed his gaze and felt a suffocating closeness in his chest. There was no real reason. It was not fear, exactly.

It was only that in the doorway of the house, under an arch of stone flowers, the girl stood, watching them with a bright black stare.

CHAPTER IV

Singing Plants

HER gaze was strangely blank. She saw them, but she saw the trees and the pathway too with the same indifferent acquiescence. And here, in her own place, there had come upon her a—a *change*, a subtle enhancement of the strangeness Ferguson had sensed about the girl from the first moment.

The spun silver hair was white fire in the sunlight. Her posture had altered, as though her muscles could flow like water. Ferguson thought of a jaguar pacing the confines of a cage, and the same feline in its native habitat. There was a difference, certainly, though this girl was not feline in the least degree.

It was *ease*—That was the quality, he saw now. Utter, placid self-confidence, untroubled by the tiny neuroses that attack civilized and uncivilized men alike. It was the air a goddess might have had, an invulnerable goddess armed with the power of Jove himself.

She was not a Circe—no. For this girl would not care about human beings. She would not trouble herself to change men to swine. As those cool, calm black eyes met his briefly, Ferguson had a troubling thought that the girl did not even regard him as a

man or whether he was of the same species. She was *not* the same species as himself. No human could be one with the forest and the ground itself, a confident unity that hung unspoken but clear enough in the quiet air.

This was the home of the goddess.

Cairns was walking slowly forward, his face white as the girl's. She regarded him as she might have looked at a squirrel-thing scurrying past on green, insensate feet. She came out of the door slowly, her hands sliding across the doorposts as if they caressed the stone-vined columns, and Ferguson thought madly that the house felt her touch and responded.

She moved away toward the jungle. Cairns' warning cry stopped Parry as he started in pursuit.

"Careful! Remember Groot."

"The devil with the girl," Sampson growled. "It's the radium we want."

But Cairns was opening his pack.

"The hypodermic," he said. "Help me, Ferguson. This time I won't fail. I'll find out. . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Find out what?" Ferguson said.

"I don't know. Odd." He turned a puzzled gaze on Ferguson. "I thought I knew, but now that I'm back here, my mind isn't clear. There's something I've got to remember." His jaw tightened. "But I've got to get the girl out of this valley! I'm clear on that, anyhow!"

His hands had been busy assembling and loading the hypodermic. The girl was a pale flash of shining hair among the trees before they were ready. But she was still in sight. Cairns started recklessly after her, and the others followed more cautiously, Ferguson scowling and troubled.

She saw them coming. She paused briefly. Then she too began to run, easily, lightly, the trees drawing back out of her way.

"Wait!" Cairns called. "Wait!"

She laughed, a thin, sweet, inhuman sound like water falling over stones. But at the sound of it, the forest stirred.

The forest—*woke*!

Ferguson had only a flashing, nightmare impression of trees leaning ponderously forward in his path. Before him a great furrow of the earth's surface rose like a watery wave, slowly, deliberately, into a crest too steep to climb. A wall that guarded the girl. The ground shuddered underfoot like the skin of a monstrous beast trying to shake them off.

Ferguson fell, his heart pounding, his throat dry with panic, in the midst of a welter of leaves and whipping branches that scored his face. He struck the ground and lay there, but he did not lie still. The earth rocked sickeningly.

It passed. The forest was still again. Ferguson reached out to pat the moist earth tentatively. He got up.

Cairns was on his feet a little distance away, and Parry and Sampson, with pale, blind, incredulous faces, were rising unsteadily. The forest whispered. It was still, but little sounds were audible; shrill, purring noises, a whine from high above, a growling among the leaves.

Ferguson sat down on a rock and took out a cigarette with trembling fingers. He said nothing till twin jets of smoke had spurted from his nostrils.

"Earthquake?" he asked Cairns, then.

The scientist was examining the hypodermic, miraculously unbroken.

"I've got to find her," he said dully.

"Was that an earthquake?"

Cairns whirled on him, eyes blazing.

"How should I know?" he snarled. "Do you think this is easy for me, not being able to remember what horrible things may exist here—doing this blind? I gave you your chance to go back! Go back now, if you want to—all of you!"

SAMPSON mumbled something.

"You were here once before and got out again okay," Parry said. "I'm keeping my mind on that."

Ferguson looked at his cigarette. "He got out okay. Yeah. But without his memory. We don't know what may have happened in here, that time."

"So it was an earthquake," Sampson said. "What about the radium?"

Parry moved uneasily.

"I don't know. I don't know. Maybe—"

"Maybe we couldn't get out now if we tried," Ferguson said.

Cairns was peering through the forest under his palm.

"I know where she's gone. She—yes, she went there the first time. I remember. There's a cavern over toward the hills. I think Jacklyn must have had his lab there, underground. I don't know what's inside, but there's radium all around the cave entrance. She was—" He hesitated. "—she was there when Groot and I came."

Ferguson stood up. Perhaps he, more than any of the others, sensed the unearthly implications of what had already happened. He knew that the dangers all around them were incalculable because they were based on an unknown quantity. And that realization seemed to have hardened him, stiffened his spine. That was one solidity he could be sure of—the cold, grim, selfless determination of the scientific investigator. At least, until that too failed him.

"All right," he said quietly. "The jungle's stopped thrashing around. Maybe we can get to that cave."

Parry said, "Not even for radium."

"What?"

"I'm not going." The man's voice cracked. "Not for all the radium in the world. I'm getting out of here. Even the rocks—look!" He pointed to the stone from which Ferguson had just risen.

It was a low, gray, rounded thing, veined with deep crimson lines that netted over the surface like veins. And, as they stared, it lurched sluggishly sidewise, relieved of Ferguson's weight, and the veins pulsed heavily, flushing a deeper red as they watched. The stone was very slowly breathing.

Sampson's hand clamped on Parry's arm.

"The radium," he said.

"I'm not going!"

Sampson's stolid face was dark.

"We're sticking together. There's four of us now. And four's better than three."

"Let go of my arm!" Parry snarled.

Sampson did not move. "I been taking orders from you for a long time. I'll keep on doing it—if you keep your nerve. We're getting that radium."

Parry tore free.

"You're a fool," he said harshly. "You're too dumb to understand what this is all about. Earthquake—yeah! I'll be glad to get out of here alive!"

"Do as you please," Cairns said. "I'm going after the girl." He turned away.

Ferguson waited a moment, while Sampson's stare locked with Parry's.

Then Parry, his shoulders slumping, followed Cairns.

"What about you, Ferguson?" Sampson said. "You getting ideas too?"

"Plenty. But I think you've got a better one. Four's better than three. We're safer if we stick together."

"Then let's go."

They went forward slowly.

"I think," Cairns said as they moved cautiously through the growling jungle, with the heavy, sweet smell of honeysuckle around them, "that I may have been mistaken about the mutations here. You've seen the strange blending of animal with plant and plant with stone. I thought it was haphazard development, mutation run wild. Now I'm beginning to believe there may be a pattern behind it. Jacklyn might have had a purpose in what he did here, whatever it was. The answer may be in the cave lab."

Ferguson grunted. Cairns' voice continued.

"A synthesis, d'you see? An attempt to bring plants and mammals and stones together in a single unit. If he succeeded in doing that, it's anybody's guess what the result was, or is."

"Why?" Ferguson asked. "Was he crazy? There's no point in carrying on such an experiment."

"I can think of one. An armistice. Did you ever realize that life on this planet is a never-ending war—beast against man, man against the forests, plants against the very rocks? There's no—no pattern. It's all random. An avalanche may snuff out an entire village, and one man can blow up a mountain. Roots can split rocks. But if a synthesis could be achieved, if the animal and vegetable and mineral kingdoms could live at peace together, think what that would mean?"

"Peace?" Ferguson said sardonically. "That fern-tailed squirrel wasn't smoking a peacepipe with the snake-vine that killed him. And what about Groot?"

THE scientist nodded his head gloomily. He saw the force of that remark.

"I'm not saying the experiment was entirely successful. And—well, Groot was an outsider, a false note. But did you notice the air of peace the girl had? She *knew* nothing could harm her."

"A *tregua de Deus*," Parry interrupted unexpectedly. "I've seen it—the truce of God. When the floods come, the animals are marooned on islands sometimes, but they don't kill each other then. Tapir, anaconda, pecary—they're safe from each other till the water goes down."

"But not safe from the water," Cairns said. "I wonder if even water would be dangerous here?"

"To us?" Ferguson said, and laughed shortly. "Don't forget what you said. We're

the intruders. We're the sour notes in this symphony."

"Joining rocks and trees and beasts—that's impossible!" Parry said. "It's unholy!"

Cairns shrugged.

"Basically they're all alike—a pattern of electric energy. I suppose the right way to experiment would be with the basic—the atomic structure. And if Jacklyn did that—"

The sentence died unfinished. They went on, and the jungle watched them go, lifting flowers like eyes among the leaves, flowers that turned on their stems as the men went by.

"Homotropic," Ferguson thought with wry humor. "Or is it anthropotropic? They're watching us, anyhow."

He listened to a deep, growling noise that went with them, soft, almost above the threshold of hearing. There was nothing that might have caused it.

"She's watching us, I think," Cairns said.

Parry jumped.

"She killed Groot. She—she could kill us the same way, couldn't she?"

"She could, I suppose," Cairns agreed. "But we can't guess her reactions. She isn't really human. When I take her back with me I'll investigate those things."

"Why are you risking all this just to get her away from this place where she belongs?" Ferguson asked bluntly.

The scientist faltered in his stride.

"I . . . knew. But now, I'm not so sure. My memory—"

"Slipping?" Ferguson asked quickly.

"No. I rather think it's coming back."

A shout from behind them brought the pair up sharply. Parry had paused and was staring up at something in the trees. Curiously, there was exultation, not fear, in his voice.

"Look at this!" he called. "Look at this—tree!"

They went back, slowly and with caution. Parry was jumping for a branch above his head, trying to reach it. Looking up, Ferguson saw what Parry was reaching for.

A tall, slim tree with pale limbs and branches dangled incredible fruit just above their heads. Great clusters of glittering light hung there, catching the sun and turning it to fire. The fruit were jewels, great clear gems quivering with white fire like diamonds, green stones hanging like green transparent grapes, red ones giving back the light from hearts of dazzling ruby.

Parry caught a branch of diamonds and swung hard to tear it down. The tree swayed and bent, all the coruscating brilliance of the jewels flashing blindingly, and the bough gave way with a ripping noise. The cluster of jewel-fruit came off in his hand. From the broken branch a shower of scarlet sap gushed out upon him, blood-red.

Parry dropped the gems and sprang back, cursing.

"Get it off! It's acid!"

They mopped the sap from his face and arms as quickly as they could. It smelled like blood too. Parry was gritting his teeth with pain. Sampson watched the man with faintly scornful eyes.

"We're after the radium," he said. "Diamonds don't grow on trees. They're phonies. They must be."

"Blood doesn't belong in trees either." Ferguson said. "I don't know about this." He finished wiping the red sap from Parry's skin, noticing that small white spots remained, cool to the touch, and hard.

"It doesn't hurt," Parry said, looking at his own hand with scared eyes.

"Some acid in the sap," Cairns hazarded. "Normal tissue growth should fix you up. Better not break any more branches, though. What are you going to do with your—brilliant?"

Parry glared at Sampson. "They're diamonds."

"They look like it. I wouldn't be too sure."

"Let's go," Sampson said gruffly. "We're wasting time."

So they went on again, and the flowers grew thicker and thicker around them as they neared the far wall of the valley. Gorgeous thick-leaved flowers like living velvet, in shapes and colors no flowers had ever assumed before. Festoons of them hung from the trees, carpets of them hid the ground, great shining sheets of blossoms swathed the thick trunks beside their path.

The sweet, cloying fragrance was still present, but subtly different. There was a bitterness under the honeysuckle, the faintest suggestion of an odor that Ferguson felt with his palate and throat. Cloying, sweet, over-rich, like the smell of blood.

Butterflies flickered through the green air trailing clouds of fragrance. Insects or animate flowers, there was no way to be sure.

And once Ferguson heard a very thin, sweet shrilling from low down among the

bushes, and his searching gaze fell on a group of tiny orchids growing on the branches, their spotted throats pulsing. A membrane stretched across the throats gave out that shrilling music.

The flowers sang and watched the men as they went on.

CHAPTER V

Man Who Saw Too Much

BEFORE them the cave was a great dark oval in the hillside. Its inner reaches seemed dark, but not with the darkness of night. A faint glow bathed the cavern's rim, and the walls within.

"Radium?" Ferguson said. "But it's dangerous!"

"Put on the lead suits," Cairns ordered. "Yes, it's radium. I tested it and I gave Groot some. You saw that sample."

They donned the flexible, improvised armor, and, shrouded in the heavy folds, went awkwardly up the slope toward the cave. Everything they saw was faintly distorted through the lead-impregnated glass of the face plates, but it may not have been simply ocular distortion that made the very wall of the cliff seem to move a little as they neared.

Certainly, Ferguson thought, the ground was stirring underfoot ever so slightly, with slow, rhythmic waves like breathing. And though no vegetation grew here, there were tiny flowers of crystal springing up through the rocks, and some of the pale stone traceries they had seen near Jacklyn's house wound leaves and vines of carved whiteness against the cliff.

In the mouth of the cave, looking at them indifferently, stood the girl.

The pale, unearthly glow of radium lighted her unprotected figure with a ghostly shining, and her hair was luminous as if with a light of its own. When they drew too close, she turned and retreated slowly into the cave.

"Cairns, you're right," Ferguson said. "She's not human. The hard radiations would have killed her long ago if she'd been human."

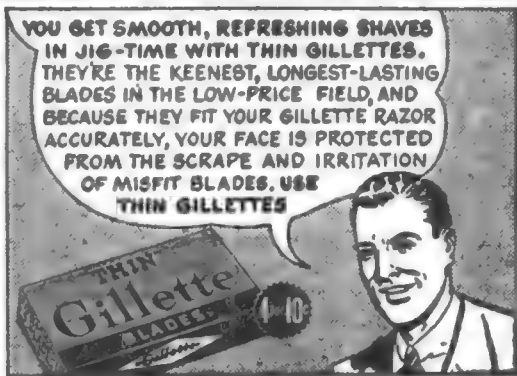
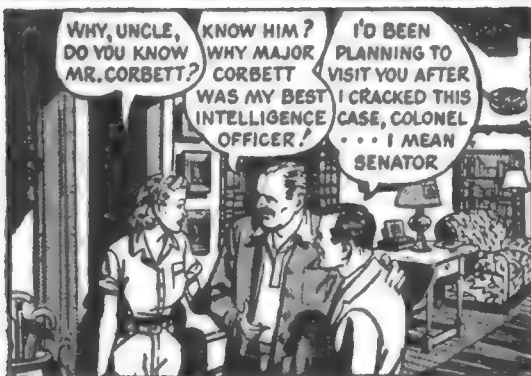
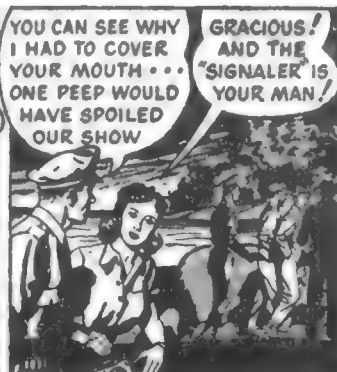
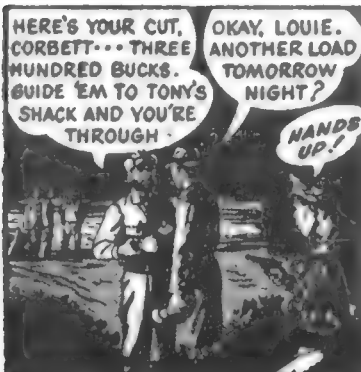
Cairns didn't hear. He was moving across the threshold of the cavern.

"Cairns!" Parry called. "Wait! What's in there?"

[Turn to page 28]

TERRY TRAPPED THE ALIEN SMUGGLERS AND THEN...

HURRYING TO REACH HER UNCLE'S CAMP ON LAKE HURON BEFORE DARK, BETTY ADAMS STUMBLES UPON MYSTERIOUS DOINGS IN WATKINS COVE



"I don't know," Cairns said without turning. "We didn't get this far last time."

A low rumbling began to roll from the darkness before them. It was a sound all four men had heard before, when they had stood at the outer gate of the valley—a deep roar that had seemed to echo through the hollowness of caverns underground.

Now it was immeasurably louder, growing in volume until its mighty torrent poured past them like an intangible river that all but swept them from their feet. And it was not any animal sound, they knew now, without knowing how they could be so sure. No animal throat ever shaped quite that hollow, vibrating depth of noise.

It rose to a terrible crescendo—inhuman—a voice that rolled tremendously, wordlessly, against the ramparts of the valley until it filled cavern and valley and the whole sky. And it diminished again, sank to a whisper and ceased, leaving the cave walls vibrating long after silence had come again.

Ferguson stared through the distorting glass of his faceplate. Cairns' face was strained and very pale.

Ferguson asked a silent question, and Cairns answered it by bending his shrouded head and resuming his slow walk up the sloping cavern flood. Ferguson never knew what force drove him reluctantly in the scientist's footsteps. Perhaps it was simple human curiosity, a force that has been strong enough to move mountains many times before in mankind's history. He only knew that it would be impossible for him to stand here on the threshold of what might be the greatest mystery that had ever existed on the earth or beneath it, and not follow.

So he went slowly after Cairns, and Parry and Sampson, afraid to stay in the cavern's quivering mouth with the cold light of the radium shivering all around them, trailed along too.

The corridor sloped gently upward into darkness. Ferguson climbed after Cairns, moving between patches of luminous pallor that gave forth light. If the girl moved before them in the full bath of the deadly radiance, he could not see her now.

Light from ahead reached Ferguson before he could locate its source. A rosy light, spilling down the slope in waves like clear water. Cairns' shrouded figure vanished; Ferguson turned a corner, and stood with the silent doctor on the threshold of a great bowl of rock whose ceiling was lost in luminescence,

not darkness. He could not look up into that blinding radiance.

Before him a vast wall of brilliance curved toward him and up, losing itself in the light overhead. It was translucent, that wall, but the light seemed to dwell in the clear, jewel-like stone, not to shine from some source behind it. And the wall was diamond. It had the unmistakable clarity which is as much dark as light, depth upon depth of crystal shooting rays of flaming, dazzling clarity.

OUT of the crystalline wall a great flower grew in a cluster of leaves and tall, folded buds. A living flower, springing from living crystal. Six feet across, it opened its monstrous throat while its highest petal curled down like a sneering lip above the golden mouth.

The flower was colored like a tiger; it was thick and soft like fur rather than petals. It was fur—a tiger-flower that blended flesh and animal in one beautiful, terrible, wonderfully colored whole. And as Ferguson looked at it, he saw motion begin to stir far back in the richly spotted throat. Motion—and sound.

A low echo of that earth-rocking roar muttered through the chamber. As the tiny orchids in the jungle had hummed their shrill song, so this titan of the crystal cavern spoke softly to them in a murmur of distant thunder, a roar like a giant tiger's out of that tiger-throat.

The furred petals quivered. The light in the cavern shook. And the girl who stood at the foot of the great flower shivered through all her pale ivory body, her luminous hair swaying as if the sound were a wind that stirred its metallic strands.

Slowly she moved toward the flower.

It knew her nearness. It knew her. It dipped on its mighty stem and the lowest petal brushed the floor. The girl set her foot upon it.

The petals closed possessively around her and she walked into the heart of the great blossom and, for an instant, vanished from sight as the tiger-spotted velvet petals enfolded her.

When they opened again she was lying in the heart of the flower, her head cushioned on a petal, her silvery hair streaming down. The black eyes were closed. Above her curved the sneering lip of the topmost petal. She was an ivory stamen in that great tiger calyx. She and the flower were one.

Flower and glowing wall of diamond were one. Crystal and flower and maiden were one—living, watching, understanding!

Through the cavern a great, earth-shaking humming drifted. As it died the girl's lips parted. Her voice told Ferguson more than anything else the unimaginable synthesis he faced. For it was not only the girl speaking.

Her voice had the clear, passionless timber with which a flower might speak, laden with the musky honeysuckle scent, and there was something clearer and colder and more fiery than flower or human tongue—the tone that the crystal wall added to the voice of the triumvirate.

Flower and burning crystal and woman together, with a rumble of the beast-roar latent in that clear, quiet tone.

"We are one," the voice said, and fires sprang up and died in the diamond wall.

Ferguson caught his breath. He could not have spoken then, but he saw the doctor's shrouded figure stir beside him.

"You come to destroy," the voice said. "We know that. But still we speak to you, as we have never spoken before to reasoning beings. What would you ask of us?"

"We ask nothing," Cairns said in a thick, shaken voice. "We will go."

The flower trembled.

"You will never go."

"For Pete's sake, what is that thing?" Parry screamed.

And the voice said:

"I am Eden."

There was a pause, and then the voice repeated the words.

"I am Eden," it said. "The new Eden. And not yet may the world know that we exist. Here in this valley begins a new race, a new step toward the ultimate goal of earth. But the step is not completed yet, though already we hold all of wisdom in our triad mind. Your race would try to destroy us, if they knew."

"No, they wouldn't!" Cairns said.

"Why, then, did you come here?"

There was a long silence.

The flower contracted a little around the girl, hiding her behind a fringe of golden petals. It opened again, revealing the ivory stamen that was its tongue.

"Why would you destroy your own creation?"

Ferguson heard the question only dimly. The blinding light of the crystal had almost dazed him, and the numbing shock of sur-

prise had not yet worn off. But he felt incredulity.

"Your own creation?" the flower said.

"I—I didn't—create you," Cairns whispered.

"Remember?" the voice said.

A GAIN the crystal wall flamed. And as the fires died, Cairns' voice came again, shaken and strangely different.

"I . . . remember. Yes, I do remember now. Everything. But I would still destroy you. I know now what I have done. The world is not yet ready. I would destroy you if I could."

"Jacklyn!" Ferguson breathed. "You're—Bruce Jacklyn!"

Cairns nodded, not to him but to the flower.

"I know my own name again. I had forgotten, outside. I've still forgotten very much. The powers I released in this valley were too strong. There was psychic trauma. But now—" His voice grew stronger. "Yes, I created you. I made you possible. The third member of the triumvirate is my own child. And I would destroy you all."

Stillness. The wall glinted with shifting points of brilliance; the great flower hung swaying on its stem, the girl rocking very gently to its motion, her hair swaying as the flower swayed. Ferguson almost stopped breathing.

Then the flower moved a little and a breath of sound murmured in its throat. A louder breath, a louder sound. The flower swayed to the volume of its own voice, and the flower was *laughing*.

Afterward, Ferguson could not quite remember clearly how they had left, stumbling in their heavy leaden robes, with the deadly radiance of the walls shining all around them and the great gusts of the flower's laughter driving them out like a gale at their backs.

And, outside, they stood staring at one another, listening to the deep, inhuman laughter still echoing from the cave.

In the end, they went back to the stone house that had been Jacklyn's. Cairns—who was Jacklyn—was silent, merely shaking his head when Ferguson tried to rouse him. Sampson and Parry were too shocked by what they had seen to be curious, but Ferguson's mind was burning with questions. His old, lost scientific zeal had come back, and he had forgotten even the radium, for the moment, in his anxiety to know the secrets of this lost land. The secrets that Cairns—

no, Jacklyn—must know.

"Why would you destroy your own creation?"

That inhuman, alien voice came back to Ferguson now as he moved through the perfumed forest. The jungle breathed all around them, stirring in its ceaseless, self-generated motion though no winds blew. Eyes upon flower-stems watched them from the dimness; ears that were stone or vine heard their words and perhaps understood them. There was no way to tell.

It did not seem so incredible. Those eyes were simply evolved photosensitive spots of tissue, and even ordinary plants could be phototropic—could respond to sunlight and moonlight and other radiations. As for mobility, many plants had limited mobility. But stone are different. Here were rocks that moved!

Ferguson thought of crystals that could build themselves up in jagged, exotic formations in certain solutions, and was filled with awe.

It would be night soon. Luckily there was a full moon. Gathering material for a fire would be difficult, if not dangerous, in this forest where the trees bled burning, acid sap. And there were the flashlights with their regenerators. As for food, they had plenty, and their canteens were nearly full. Even the brooks that ran in this forbidden valley might be—different.

So, still under the oppressive burden of silence, they came to the stone house and paused on the threshold warily. Ferguson touched his pistol, staring into the gloom ahead.

"Cairns—Jacklyn, I mean."

The scientist roused himself. "Yes. What is it, Ferguson?"

"Anything apt to be dangerous inside?"

Jacklyn ran his hand over the lintel and drew it back sharply, as though surprised to find it stone instead of wood.

"I don't know. There's danger all around us." He stepped across the threshold, and Ferguson followed, blinking as his eyes adjusted to the dimness.

"Just as I left it, years ago," Jacklyn said.

Here was peace and quiet and familiar things, as though the raging turmoil of life gone mad in the valley had not dared enter the stone house. A crude table and canvas chairs, books were scattered around, and some pots and pans. Through a doorway Ferguson could see a cot, blankets still

rumpled across its foot. And he saw more.

With a sharp inhalation of breath he went into that room. He touched the blankets gingerly.

They were stone.

Jacklyn had not followed. Ferguson heard his steps moving here and there, and Sampson's heavier tread. He returned. Parry was still on the threshold, a silhouette against the brighter light outside.

"Nothing's changed, except to stone," Jacklyn said. "Just as I left it. Look at this."

Ferguson came forward. Jacklyn indicated a Bible lying open on a stone table.

"My wife's," he said. "She used to read it." He tried to turn the pages, but the book, too, was stone.

Yet the print was legible. Ferguson read half-audibly;

"The heaven shall reveal his iniquity, and the earth shall rise up against him."

"The earth shall rise up!" Jacklyn whispered. He sank down on a chair, once canvas, now stone. "It did, Ferguson. It did. I remember."

His voice died away, and rose again, stronger.

"Not even Adam saw what I saw. For God made Adam on the sixth day, after He had made the firmament and the earth and the waters under the earth. . . .

"But I have seen—*Creation!*"

CHAPTER VI

Marble Man

S TONE tracteries of vines and bas-relief blossoms had clustered across the walls. Ferguson thought that those flowers of stone were watching. And that something—perhaps the walls themselves—was listening. He crossed the thick carpet to a chair and sat down, but Sampson and Parry stood waiting, their eyes on Jacklyn's haggard face.

"The—the triumvirate—gave me my memory again, back there in that cave. I don't know how. It—they—have strange powers."

"You made that thing?" Parry asked in a shaken voice.

"I never saw it before. But I was responsible for it, yes. I unleashed the power that made it possible. Here in this valley, years and years ago. . . ."

The tired voice deepened. "It was a lovely place when we first came here, Mona and I. There was no shadow over it. The Indios took care of us, and I worked on my experiments, and there was no shadow. I had found a clue to something man had been searching for for years—the controlled cleavage of the atom. There was an element here which may exist nowhere else on earth, an element with a molecular structure large enough and simple enough to study under controlled conditions. I was seeking a basic pattern, a master key, and what I found was a new force. It was an energy powerful enough to permeate all matter, and to stimulate the rate of entropy."

"I don't get you," Sampson said, but Jacklyn went on unheeding.

"Mona was expecting a child. I wanted to take her down river to Manaos, but she would not go. I'd have taken her by force, if necessary, but the child was born prematurely. There was nothing to be done but improvise. Still, I hold a medical degree, the child lived, and Mona lived too—for a while.

"But I found that master key. That part isn't clear. Perhaps the—the triumvirate didn't want me to remember it. I could never repeat the experiment, even if I should want to. It was enough that I opened the doors of Creation once."

His face paled. "It was like a flame that leaped through the valley. An invisible flame. I was out hunting when it happened. The air shook. The ground moved under my feet. I—I felt that primal, ravening energy rush out from its focal point, as though God had stooped and touched this cursed valley with his finger.

"It was Creation.

"First—chaos. The forest shook, and the ground shook, and the sky shook too. I saw—unnameable things!" He pressed his palms against his eyes, shuddering. "One thing I remember. Mona running toward me, and the earth opening like a mouth, and—taking her. . . .

"And after that, darkness. My mind was wiped clean. I must have escaped from the valley somehow. And some latent pattern of memories deep in my brain must have brought me back here, years later, though I did not quite know why, and rationalized it in various ways. But it was that lost memory that drew me back, after so many years.

"And during those years my daughter was alive here, in the new Eden. But the basic

radiation I had loosed was working on her, changing her. I had planned, remember, to establish a linkage between all matter. Well, I succeeded. Stone and plant and human merged, and the ultimate synthesis was the thing you saw in the cave.

"A triumvirate. Three in one, one that is three. And because of that basic pattern, not merely three. It is Eden.

"All Eden is one tremendous, living entity, welded into a unit, a synthesis of stone and other things. The ground beneath our feet is alive. And as much a part of the triumvirate as is my daughter now."

Jacklyn paused before saying in a loud, tense voice, "But this hellish thing must be destroyed!"

Ferguson did not speak. He was staring down at the carpet at his feet. And he saw, suddenly, that it was not a carpet. It grew directly from the stone floor. But it was not grass, either.

It was fur, such as might grow on the hide of some immense carnivore.

"You're crazy, Jacklyn," Parry said. "Destroy that creature? It could wipe us out."

"It's the radium we're after," Sampson growled. "We were fools not to have got it while we were at the cave."

Ferguson stared at him. "I'm not so sure. Those rock walls were moving. They were alive. They might have resented being dug into."

Sampson and Parry looked at Jacklyn, hoping he would give them his opinion.

But Jacklyn was still on the trail of his thought. "Eden! Yes, this is Eden. But even in the first Eden there was the snake."

"The snake?" Ferguson asked.

"Who destroyed that first experiment in mankind before it was finished. The snake—the reptile—the creature whose people ruled the world, perhaps, before humanity rose. We are the rulers of earth now. We are men. But before us, perhaps, was the snake. Two thousand years from now, there may be an allegory about *this* Eden, an allegory which will be read by a race not human, the race that is beginning in this valley now, the synthesis, the triumvirate."

"So?"

JACKLYN turned his brooding eyes upon Ferguson.

"The snake was sent to test the first man. And perhaps we have been sent to test the

triumvirate. We are the intruders in Eden now, the representative of the older race."

"What good are guns?" Parry asked. "We can't fight that monster. It's too strong for us."

Ferguson thought: "The serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field."

Yes, the triumvirate was strong. But there were other weapons than strength. And in this Eden—were they not the serpent?

They were silent, while the slow night came down. Parry was absorbed in prodding the white spots upon his arm and face where the plant's red blood had spattered. The spots were spreading. They were hard and white and cold, and the areas where they merged were wholly without feeling.

Finally they slept, and, outside, the jungle slept too, fitfully, moving in its sleep. Nothing disturbed them, though the blossoms of stone on the walls may have watched them all night, and a few moths that gave out the odor of roses blundered through the windows occasionally. Perhaps, Ferguson thought, in the cavern the flower slept, and the girl cradled in its tiger-spotted calyx. Perhaps even the crystal wall slept too, in its vague affinity with living things.

But when morning came, the awakening brought new fear.

There was nothing different about the valley. Dawn came up beautifully, full of light and cool color. The trees stretched their limbs like animals awakening; the flower-mouths yawned all through the woods.

Ferguson sat up first. Jacklyn was on guard, but his back was turned and he was staring through the doorway. Ferguson glanced at the sleeping Sampson, and then at Parry. He looked into Parry's open eyes, and froze.

Parry's eyes were altered. They were no longer dark; they were clear and colorless, and startlingly brilliant. They met Ferguson's eyes with a bright, indifferent gaze.

"Parry!" Ferguson said. At the sound of his voice Sampson woke, and Jacklyn turned. They saw the change instantly. Parry met their stares without emotion. He did not seem to realize what had happened to him.

"He—he's *white*," Sampson whispered, pointing with an unsteady hand to Parry's marble-pale, marble-hard face and mottled body where the torn shirt exposed the skin. "It's spread! He's—"

Ferguson said, "Even the eyes . . . like gems. Parry! Are you awake?"

Parry blinked his colorless, dazzling gaze at them. His face was the color of stone; even his brows and lashes were white, and his hair was a tangle of ridged marble like the hair of a statue. But his features were still shockingly flexible. He blinked his stone eyelids—which should not have been able to move at all!

"Sure, I'm awake," he said in a strange, flat voice. "What's the matter?" And they could hear the sound of his stone tongue touching his teeth of stone.

"You've turned to rock!" Sampson shouted half hysterically. "Get away from me—don't touch me! You're stone!"

Parry looked down in bewilderment. He lifted white hands and flexed the fingers stiffly, staring. Then with an abrupt gesture he ripped the shirt away and they could see all the marble torso, like a chiseled statue. Here and there mottlings of flesh still showed, as yesterday mottlings of marble had appeared upon his skin. But the flesh areas grew perceptibly smaller as they looked, as the inexorable marble crept over him and through him.

He lifted to the other men a diamond stare, and a wild glare of terror began to flame behind the dazzling clarity of his eyes.

"That tree!" he said. "The jewel-tree! Its juice did this."

"No wonder the flower laughed," Jacklyn said dully. "It knew. No one can enter this valley and live here unchanged. The taint spreads. And you're the first, Parry. But not the last!" He glanced around the circle, searching the other faces, and each man involuntarily scanned his neighbor for the betraying mottlings upon the skin.

"Don't touch anything," Sampson said. "Don't touch Parry. Don't touch any branches or anything at all."

"It can reach us through the ground," Jacklyn said. "And it will. It will."

"Who will?" Parry's voice had thickened, as if the stone tongue was losing its mobility. "Who did this to me?"

"The triumvirate, I suppose," Ferguson said. "The thing that spoke through the flower. Even if the valley's one great unit, the flower is its ruler."

PARRY had lurched to his feet.

"The flower!" he said in that thickened, flat monotone. "The flower did it! Changed me to a rock."

He swung around and plunged through the

doorway, shouting something in a voice as stony as his flesh.

Sampson leaped out of his path in terror. But Parry was gone in a moment, a white figure in tattered garments stumbling through the trees.

"But if he attacks the flower—we've got to stop him!" Jacklyn said. "That's the center of the valley—its brain."

"Fine," Ferguson said coldly. "That's why I told Parry where to go. Maybe we can't hurt the flower, but he's nearly stone. I doubt if it can hurt him."

"You made Parry think the flower did it?" Sampson said.

"It was the truth. Don't forget that. And Parry's dying anyway. Or else he may live forever, in stone. This way, if he kills the flower he may get an easier death himself. And I think he'd want that."

Jacklyn was already outside of the house.

"The flower isn't the only part of the triumvirate. There's the crystal, and my daughter. He might kill her."

Ferguson had forgotten. Now, even though he knew that the girl was no longer human, he instinctively followed Jacklyn, and Sampson. He paused only to snatch up some equipment, before he ran from the house.

They moved fast. It was a nightmare flight through the awakening jungle, with Parry's white figure flickering before them. Streamers from the trees reached down occasionally to impede their flight, but Parry ran unmolested.

"He's part of the valley now," Jacklyn panted. "The forest isn't attacking him any more."

They ran on, early sunlight dappling the path before them and inhuman voices beginning to waken in the trees. But in the end, when the mouth of the cavern loomed before them, glowing eternally with its deadly radiations, they were just in time to see a pale figure vanishing into the throat of the cave, just in time to hear Parry's hollow shout echoing back.

Ferguson gripped Jacklyn's shoulder and dragged him back. The scientist struggled to tear free.

"The radium!" Ferguson shouted. "We can't go in there without—"

"I've got the suits," Sampson said behind them. He tossed two of the leaden robes to Ferguson, and even Jacklyn understood how suicidal it would be to enter the cave without their protection. But he chafed at the mo-

mentary delay, and the moment the hood was over his head, he was racing after Parry.

There was an extra suit.

"Forget it," Ferguson said grimly. "Parry won't need that any more."

"Yeah," Sampson said. He gripped a lead box in one hand as he followed Ferguson into the cave.

They were in time.

On the glittering threshold of the inner cavern they paused with Jacklyn, staring. The great tiger-flower swayed on its stem halfway up the wall of crystal. The pale-haired girl stood just beneath it, watching the stone man charging forward.

"Parry!" Jacklyn shouted.

All through the room the light quivered. Parry's feet boomed upon the stone floor as he ran. The flower tilted its cup downward and a roaring was beginning to hum from its tiger-striped throat as Parry hurled himself blindly forward.

He cast up both stone arms like a diver and sprang for the gaping flower mouth, straight into that monstrous, roaring throat.

CHAPTER VII

Eden No More

EVER afterward to Ferguson what happened then was nightmare. Ferguson saw the great streaked petals shut like a closing maw over the white body of Parry; he heard the muffled roaring echoing savagely from the walls. He heard the girl scream.

The closed flower lashed furiously on its stem. Parry's yells mingled with the tiger-roars. Then there was a ripping, sucking sound, and the furred petals suddenly bulged and split. Golden blood poured down. Parry's stone arms appeared, tearing at the tiger-striped flesh of the flower.

Louder the roaring grew, bellows of fury. There was a stir of motion behind the great blossom and a tall, folded bud leaned down from its leaves and began slowly to unfurl. The flower was calling for its successor bud to help.

Toward Parry the opening blossom bent. The paralysis left Ferguson. He snatched his revolver from its holster and sent shot after shot crashing into the new flower.

It shrank back briefly. But beyond it,

another bud was opening.

Parry's voice—a man's voice no longer, but a hollow, echoing cry of stone made vocal—rolled again above the shrill screaming of the torn flower. And like that screaming, it, too, was a cry for help.

The call did not go unanswered. For as bud after bud opened and bent with great opening lips toward Parry, a sound behind Ferguson made him whirl. He saw Jacklyn hurled aside, saw Sampson, bulky and grotesque in the lead armor, spring back, and into the chamber lashed an arm of white filigree, a moving vine of stone.

After it came another, and another, great writhing arms that coiled snakelike into the chamber. The living rocks of Eden were answering the summons as flesh made of stone cried to vines made of stone for help against its enemy.

Great marble arms clashed forward. They were less supple than the tiger flowers, but they had the weight of stone in their favor. One wound about a giant stooping bud and closed its opening petals with a grip of marble, while the other stone vines writhed forward toward the roaring flowers that bent to meet them.

Still imprisoning Parry, the great, torn blossom screamed shrilly, dripping golden blood. Ferguson flattened himself against the trembling walls, his useless gun gripped in a gloved hand. The inhuman shrieking pierced his ears agonizingly. The wounded flower was screaming for help to the whole jungle valley beyond.

And the jungle replied.

From outside the cave a deep and terrible roar began to roll thunderously through Eden. Into the vaulted chamber poured a flood of vines, flower-eyes staring like snakes from the coiling tendrils. Scarlet, azure, purple and sun-yellow and amethyst, the flowers glared from that tangle of green tendrils and white withes flailing savagely in combat—the blossoms screaming more shrilly than the great wounded flower that held Parry's stone body.

Across the turmoil Jacklyn shouted something to his daughter, still frozen and motionless, miraculously untouched amid the battle.

And she heard. For the first time she seemed to feel humanity within her, heard with human ears instead of the insensate ears of the triumvirate. She turned her head, and there was life in her black eyes, and

terror and appeal.

She cried out, inarticulately, but Ferguson felt the difference in her voice. It was human now, momentarily freed from the passionless rule of plant and stone. And she ran lightly through the welter of struggling serpentine things toward them.

Jacklyn opened his leaden cape and folded it about her as well as he could. "Ferguson," he said urgently. "Help me! We've got to get out of here! We've got to get *her* out too!"

"Parry!" Sampson yelled. "We can't leave him here!"

But even as he spoke, the great tiger flower in which Parry still struggled reared high on its stem, like a striking snake. It poised, hovering—and then smashed down on the crystal wall, screaming.

Parry's stone limbs were shattered against the crystal.

The crystal screamed!

Great jagged streaks sprang out like lightning flashing across its glittering surface. It began to buckle. Crystals dropped in gleaming rain.

Down on the tiger flowers thundered the wall of diamond!

THE walls trembled, moved, breathed in and out. Ferguson tore his fascinated stare away. He shouted, pushed Jacklyn toward the opening. With Sampson, they fled across sinewy, writhing vines that still fought the tendrils of whipping stone.

Then they were in the sunlight again. The whole hillside was shaking with great, rhythmic breaths as they ran. Stumbling, reeling, they labored on, hearing behind them the screams of the battling, inhuman things as rock and flesh and foliage tore at one another in mad, ghastly fury.

The jungle before them was in turmoil. The control of the triumvirate brain had let go utterly now, and the delicate balance that had kept Eden poised was shattered. Things that should not have been animate ripped and tore in blind answer to the blindness of the Brain in the ruined cave. The Brain, the collapsing, ruined remnants of the triumvirate, still sent out its insane, crimson thoughts of fury, and the jungle raged in response.

Ferguson jerked to a halt, missing Sampson. He turned, to see the lead-suited figure still within the entrance of the cave, stamping through the twisting vines, a gleaming

chisel in one gloved hand, the lead box in the other. Ferguson's stomach lurched as he saw what Sampson was doing.

The chisel dug frantically at the glowing radium that coated the cave wall.

"Sampson!" Ferguson shouted, his voice lost in the crying that rose from the trees of Eden. "You fool! Don't touch that."

Sampson worked on unheeding. Perhaps he did not notice the way the stone wall winced away from his sharp chisel. Perhaps he did not understand that the very rock was alive, and—could feel.

The cave mouth quivered. And—began to close!

Sampson saw his danger then. He dropped the chisel and began to run, but the vines on which he trod impeded his progress. He stumbled! . . .

The mouth of the cave closed, with a screaming of riven rock.

Sick and dizzy, Ferguson turned and observed Jacklyn's discarded lead suit lying beside the path. Hurriedly he ripped off his own, then raced after the scientist and his daughter, half deafened by the yelling of the forest. All around him the breathing rocks were battling the living vines. The great veins of the boulders spilled thick purple blood.

Trees had their limbs locked in aerial combat, dragging one another from the ground by shrieking roots.

One brown-skinned tree had torn a long branch from an adversary, and Ferguson saw that the branch was jointed like an arm; he could see the broken bone standing white from the brown bark. He had a momentary, giddy wonder if this might not be the answer to what had finally happened to Jacklyn's vanished Indios.

He caught up with Jacklyn and helped him drag the panting girl onward. The earth was rolling now beneath their stumbling feet. Clusters of flowers were reaching out avid, sucking mouths. But for the most part the jungle was lost in its own suicidal frenzy as it tore itself to fragments through all the screaming valley.

They came to the cleft in the cliff at last, bruised and ripped, breathless and bleeding, but alive. The narrow gorge was breathing

as all the rocks of the valley were breathing now, in heavy panting convulsions. The narrow opening grew still narrower, then gaped apart again.

Ferguson glanced at the girl. She was gasping, as though the tumult in Eden had its echo in her mind.

Ferguson's voice was inaudible above the tumult, but he pointed to the cleft. Jacklyn nodded. The girl tried to pull free. Ferguson slid his arm around her waist and urged her on.

On each side the rock walls groaned. They narrowed. Ferguson felt them brush his shoulders as he squeezed through the last few feet.

Behind him the gorge crashed shut.

It opened, rocks screaming, and Ferguson turned.

For the last time—he saw Eden.

Jacklyn had seen Eden's creation, but Ferguson saw the Garden's ending.

The earth was opening.

From the center of Eden a pit broadened, engulfing forest and shrieking stones and all that incredible land where a new race had found birth and perished. Across the valley the gulf spread.

The earth swallowed Eden.

FROM the depths came the sound of a cataclysmic explosion, a thunderous booming as of crashing worlds, and a shaft of scarlet light flamed upward toward the sky.

The cleft in the rock screamed shut. This time it did not open.

Ferguson stumbled back a few steps. He could see Jacklyn, could see the girl, and the girl had changed. The inhuman pallor was gone from her flesh, and the alien darkness had vanished from her black eyes.

"She's human," Jacklyn breathed. "Ferguson, she's come back. It didn't change her so much that she—she couldn't revert."

But Ferguson was watching the burning shaft that slowly faded against the sky beyond the barrier of rock. His lips moved silently.

"He placed at the east of Eden . . . a flaming sword . . . to keep the way of the tree of life. . . ."



NEXT ISSUE

THE MANLESS WORLDS
A Novel of Future Space War by MURRAY LEINSTER

THE END

By MURRAY LEINSTER

When universal disaster threatens, Ron Hort and Sart Voorn fight ruthless pirates while striving to find the answer to an ancient enigma which offers another chance for humanity!

CHAPTER I

Doom in the Sky



THE cavalcade moved across the ice, which stretched to the horizon on every hand. It was smooth as glass, with absolutely no track, no ripple, no feature of any sort to break its monotony. Ahead, in the direction toward which the cavalcade moved, there was a blur which broke the sharp edge of the world.

Something stretched upward there, into the dark-purple sky. The sun shone a deep, dull red, giving off little light and a barely perceptible warmth, which only men, accustomed to the utter chill of Earth in these its dying days, could have detected.

The men moved swiftly, but without energy. They wore long runners on their feet, like the runners of sleds, and very tiny motors thrust them forward so that they guided themselves rather than moved by any exertion. They wore glittering metallic-seeming garments—which would lose little body-heat by radiation—and there were transparent masks over their faces.

In those masks, the air they breathed out gave up all its heat and moisture to the air they breathed in, and there were no puffs of vapor from it even in the incredibly cold thin air through which they moved. There were three sled-like vehicles, in the train, which churned ahead upon oddly simplified caterpillar-like treads.

The cavalcade went on. The dull-red sun climbed higher into the dark sky it shared with many bright stars. Above the eastern sky, behind it, a cold white glow appeared. It was not the brightness of heat but of the Milky Way, many times multiplied. Individual stars could not be detected, but it was the glare of a new star-mass, an island universe, so near to the confines of the First Galaxy that it appeared to be an extension of it.

As the star mass rose, the men turned to look at it. The cavalcade came actually to a halt so that all might regard it.

"It hardly seems to change," said Ron Hort, "and it seems very far away."

"Far enough," said the driver of an ice-tractor, drily, "so the light we see it by is old. It has come closer since that light came on ahead."

Ron nodded.

"The End has begun," he admitted. "It seems strange to think that it will strike us before the light of its own creation."

FROM behind Ron came a voice.

"We have at the most five years," said a man on runners. "We may have only weeks or days or minutes. I think we are fools to bother about Sart. I came, but when I go back I shall enjoy myself for what time remains. I'll not be like you, Ron, drawing back from marriage with a pretty girl because we might have only days or weeks together instead of years. If a woman likes me, I'll settle for hours!"

"That is my affair," said Ron shortly. "We may as well go on. There is the landmark. I think I will go ahead and tell Sart what has been decided. If I speak to him privately,

AN ASTONISHING COMPLETE NOVELET



As Ren and Hana ran through the place of machines, they noticed an old man sitting at a control board

he may be able to accept the popular decision with dignity."

"Why be dignified?" someone said cynically. "What is the difference, now?"

"It is all we have left," Ron said curtly. "Must we lose that, too?"

He turned away and the motors on his sled-runners increased their speed. The cavalcade came on after him, but it was held back by the lesser speed of the ice-tractors. They were very old—a thousand years or more—and already the known doom before the human race had made men apathetic, so that they hardly cared if their machines were efficient or not. A cranky machine, indeed, was almost welcomed as a distraction from the meaning of that bright patch of the Second Galaxy in the sky.

Thin air flowed past Ron as he sped onward. Earth was very, very old. The sun was a cooling, dark-red orb which could not even dim out the stars on its rising. Earth had had no inhabitants for millions of years, now, and only occasional visitors like these. From pole to pole the oceans were frozen, and there had been no cloud in its skies for millenia.

When even carbon dioxide was frozen to snow, there was no water-vapor left for clouds! There were hardly any winds, either. Earth was a dead world, save for the one pin-point of a man-made dome where the galaxy's last scientific expedition was centered. Atomic energy, there, released light and heat to make green things grow and water run, and to allow the last members of the human race to wait in comfort for the catastrophe which had been foreseen for most of the race's history.

The bright patch in the sky was its symbol. It was an island universe, the Second Galaxy, as great as the First, which was the means by which humanity was finally to be ended. Far, far back in prehistory, before atomic power was discovered and the human race existed only on this one then smiling Earth—so far back that barely the memory of the time remained—the first guesses of this End had been made.

At that time primitive astronomers had proudly announced the discovery of the expanding universe; that every island continent in the cosmos was receding from the First Galaxy. Even then they could calculate from a red shift in spectral lines the velocities of the separating galaxies. And of course they could trace the lines of flight back to a com-

mon point and time of beginning, and make some feeble computation of the unimaginable explosion which was the beginning of them all.

That was the start of the cosmos: explosion. The scattered atoms, flung away from each other with inconceivable violence, in time had coalesced into suns and galaxies. Those island universes sped on outward, separating by thousands and millions of parsecs until gradually, bit by bit, their mutual attraction slowed their flight. In the course of aeons they slowed and stopped. And then they began the long, long fall back to the center of their mutual mass.

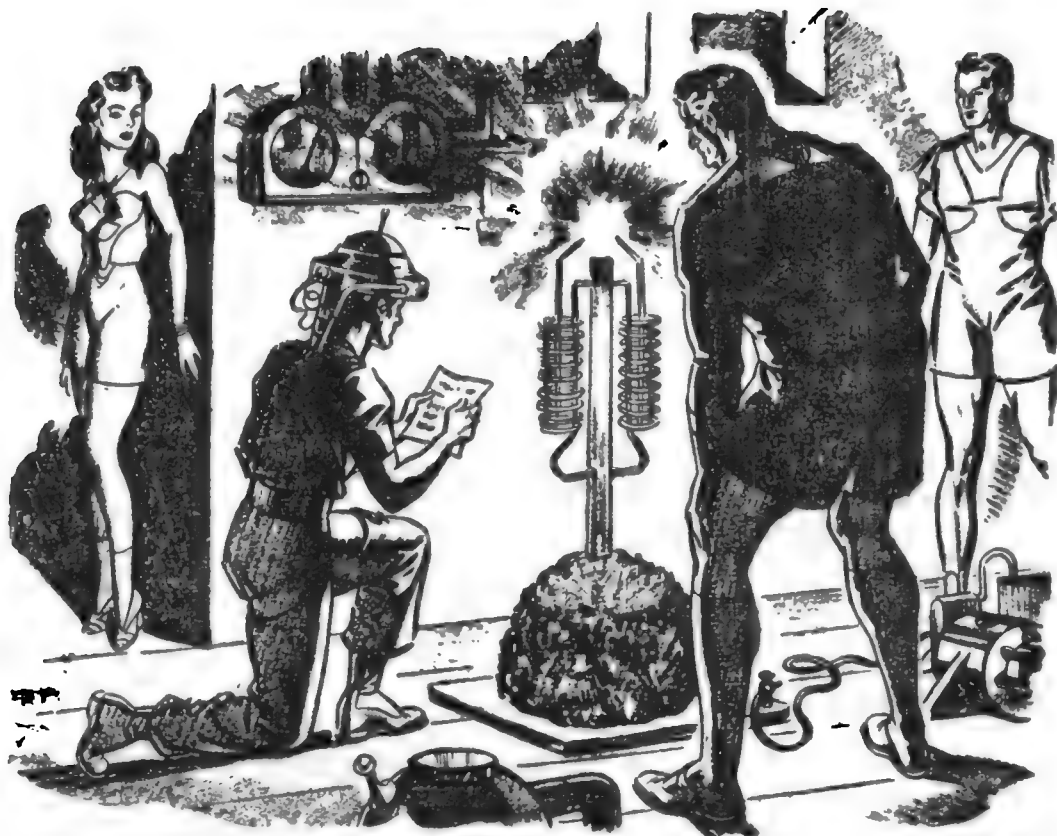
But it was no ordered, straight-line fall. Minute gravities, operating through intergalactic space for uncounted millions of years, brought about collisions as the galaxies fell toward extinction. Four such catastrophes had already been seen. And now such an End faced the First Galaxy, in which the human race had spread through fifty thousand light-years and three hundred million planets.

THE bright space in the heavens was the nearing Second Galaxy; seen by light which had left it forty thousand years before. The First and Second island universes plunged toward each other. And they would not merely merge or interpenetrate each other. The previous catastrophes had shown the pattern which was to come.

As organized star-systems hurtled together, gravitic strains burst the suns; broke them not as atomic disintegration breaks down a heavy element to a lighter, but tore them down to sheer, inchoate energy. Such violence of disruption shattered even space. The previous collisions of galaxies had shown pure destruction spreading from the point of impact at many times the speed of light.

Men—the last, waiting group which had returned to Earth in a hopeless hope of wresting wisdom from the ancients—men could look at the light which had left the destroyer forty thousand years before and know that the collision had already taken place.

Somewhere behind the curtain of stars they saw, annihilation leaped toward them faster than the light they looked at. It would come unheralded. And it would be final. There was literally no escape. No spacecraft could hope to outrun it, nor was there any place in all the cosmos where there could



Ron scanned the ancient paper while Sart stood there, studying the device of crystal rods and bare wound wires

be refuge. The universe itself was bound for destruction, and presently there would be but one vast central detonation which would begin the eternal cycle once again.

Humanity had not, on the whole, taken its coming annihilation calmly. For five hundred years the human population of the First Galaxy had been dropping, as people refused to bring new lives into a foredoomed universe. The race now numbered only millions, from its peak of six hundred billions souls. And the millions who remained reacted variously, but mostly without real dignity.

Some worked on frantically in quest of an escape. Some—even now—pretended a sudden blind disbelief in the science which had made men masters of the inhabitable planets of a hundred million suns. Those dogged doubters went on obstinately—with twitching nerves—in a feigned confidence that human civilization would go on forever. The populations of whole planets plunged into crazy revelry, the inhabitants casting aside all self-respect in the most loathsome ex-

cesses to keep from thinking of what was ahead.

But some humans had dropped off all the veneer of civilization and plunged into orgies of criminality for greater oblivion of the future. There was piracy and murder and utterly futile looting for the first time in a quarter-million years. There were spaceships roving the ether with crews half-mad or worse from a combination of despair and drugs, committing the most monstrous crimes in a hopeless attempt to blot out all thought of what lay before them.

The expedition to Earth—however hopeless its program may have been—at least had avoided these absurdities up to now. But now despair had overcome even its members.

Ron Hort left the cavalcade behind and sped on toward the horizon. In the queer dim-red light the party dwindled to a mere point, a speck, and then was not. But before him a thin rocky pinnacle loomed higher and higher. It rose sheer from the everlasting ice—three thousand feet of naked stone, coated

only here and there with whitish frost which the dull-red sunshine turned to pink. At its base was a leanto structure, and beside it the weirdly misshapen pile of ice which meant, of course, excavation under Earth's omnipresent ice-cap.

The man glided swiftly to the very edge of the detritus-heap at the peak's base. He stepped from his twin runners and put them over his shoulder. He walked with seeming awkwardness over the uneven ground to where a light glared, directing him. A door opened, he stepped into the heat-lock, the outer door closed, and warm air gushed around him. His cold-suit frosted instantly and the rime cracked and fell from it as he stripped it off.

A roaring voice greeted him as he pushed open the inner door.

"Ron Hort, by all the ages! Welcome! I've something to show you, man! Something there's no record of, anywhere, in all the memory-machines!"

CHAPTER II

Raiders from Erdath

BRIGHTNESS blazed here inside the outpost—brightness such as the younger stars to which humanity had migrated cast upon their planets. Gleaming golden light glowed everywhere, vastly different from the dull-red day outside. Sart Voorn came beaming to grasp Ron's two hands and to pump them. His wife smiled brightly behind him, though her eyes were haunted.

It was warm and comfortable in the living-quarters here. Ron managed to grin.

"I have bad news, Sart," he said.

He saw Sali, Sart's wife, turn white. Sart blinked at him.

"The End?" demanded Sart with an effect of anger. "It's outrageous! How long?"

Ron shook his head.

"No change in the estimates," he said awkwardly. "Anything up to five years is still the guess. Nothing more or less. But there's been a bad decision at the Dome."

Sart snorted in relief.

"You had me frightened!" he said indignantly. "This thing I've found, Ron—it's a trick of the ancients of which there is no record anywhere. It's incredible that they could do it and do nothing with it! I've an

idea that if we can solve the problem we might—we *might*, I say—do something even about the End!"

Ron shrugged his shoulders. Nobody could do anything about the End. Even if a spaceship could outrun destruction, which was unthinkable, it could have no destination. Uncountable millions or billions of years must pass before there would ever be suns or planets again on which human beings could live.

"The bad news is that there will be no more supplies for you, Bart," he said. "You will have to come back to the Dome. There are five hundred of us on Earth. There was no hope when we came here, though we told ourselves that there were collateral lines of research the ancients had abandoned and we'd never heard of, and that we'd hunt for them in hope of a way to beat the End. We've spent two years. We've found the ancient cities, and we've searched in what ruins the glaciers left, but it's stopped even being amusing. The other outposts gave up weeks and months ago. Yours is the last. I got a group together to come for you and Sali and the boy. Where is he, by the way?"

"Asleep," said Sart curtly. "Sali tells me that when you are one year old you prefer sleep to conversation with your father. But go on."

"I got a group together to bring you back with your equipment," said Ron awkwardly. "But they brought no supplies. They say there's nothing to do but wait. That we can't do anything else. The decision has been made not even to try to do anything else."

Sart scowled, with beetling brows.

"Beaten, eh?" he said wrathfully. "To the devil with them! I stay here—Sali and the boy and I! If the End comes, we will still be fighting it!"

Ron smiled, rather grimly.

"I'd prefer that, myself," he said. "So does Hana. Nevertheless she still refuses to marry me. She says it would only increase our bitterness, since we could never forget that we were doomed."

Sali's fixed bright smile wavered and vanished.

"She is right!" she said harshly. "Sart and I—we had our little boy because Sart wished to defy fate. But we should not have done it! We should not have let him be born, only to die when the End comes! It was cruel—cruel!"

She sobbed suddenly. Sart put out a huge

paw and patted her shoulder awkwardly.

"Perhaps I was wrong," he rumbled. "But always, for ages, there has been an End for everyone, and something on beyond. We will see what we will see. Meanwhile I'll show Ron what I have found. It is incredible, Ron. The ancients were fools and murderers, and they had no memory-machines and they were unspeakable, but at times they reached magnificent heights. This thing . . . come and look at it!"

He dragged his guest through the archway from the living quarters of the outpost to the working-space beyond.

IT WAS sheer crudity here. Great girders leaned against the rocky base of the cliff, with a welded roof between them. Glaring lights glowed. One's breath made a visible vapor here, because the floor was ice and there was no insulating layer above it. There was a sloping tunnel down into the ice-pack, and tiny generators and huge pumps. Lights melted away the ice, the pumps drew up the liquid water, and other pumps forced it out into the incredible frigidity outside. It had made a great heap of frozen debris beyond the outpost walls, but pumps and generators were silent now. Off to one side were odds and ends of ancient machinery and a pile of perfectly preserved sheets of paper with printing on it—books.

"That stuff would make the reputation of any archaeologist, if anyone cared," said Sart expansively. "I found a city, Ron, in what must have been the lee of a rocky spur. When it was abandoned, it must have been covered deep with snow, which packed down and solidified behind the mountain-spur. Then glaciers came. They slid over the city instead of into it, and it is almost intact. I admit that I was excited as I scanned it from above. I could not believe my instruments when they picked out a building which had been a museum, but I drove a shaft down, and there it was!"

He pointed to a cryptic, ancient relic, booming triumphantly: "An atomic generator, of the type that blew up regularly in the early days, with such violence that they were forbidden for a thousand years. You should look at it, Ron! It dates from before space-travel! It is incredible that they did not set off the whole planet and wipe out the human race in its cradle!"

He pointed again.

"A calculator. You can see in it the in-

finitely crude forerunner of the memory-machine. And that is a book of physics! You should read it! You would laugh, but there is one paragraph which gives one food for thought. And here—"

He made a sweeping gesture.

"Here, my friend, you see what is perhaps the greatest triumph of the human brain in all its history!"

His eyes shone. He was huge and beefy and blustering and opinionated, but there was now a vast triumph and a tremendous respect in his voice and manner.

Ron looked. He saw a roughly conical object, which looked more like a heap of scabrous, faintly-greenish dust than anything else. There was nothing more.

His eyes stung a little, so he rubbed them. Above what appeared a dusty heap of rust he felt a peculiar difficulty in focussing his gaze. He moved his head. The difficulty persisted. He stepped to one side, and his jaw dropped. A table loaded with instruments had been all of eight feet from him. Now it was barely two. He reached out his hand and touched it. He moved back to his original position—and it was eight feet away again in the same direction! It was far out of reach.

He started to speak, checked himself, then moved carefully about the odd appearance. Only it was not an appearance. To the contrary, he saw nothing whatever but the normal litter of an experimental excavation-laboratory. But when he looked at that letter through the space above a conical dust heap which looked like a rust-pile, it seemed nearer.

"What is it?" he asked. "A sort of lens? Only, I do not find a focal length! It makes things look nearer. It is rather like the strained-space lenses astronomers have used for a long time, save that there are no coils."

Sart Voorn raised brawny arms in an exaggerated gesture of disgust.

"Ye ages!" he cried. The man thinks it is a lens! Look!"

He walked up to the—not appearance, but—space where appearances changed. He held out his arm as he advanced. Suddenly his hand and wrist were six feet from the end of his arm, dangling in mid-air. The fingers moved. The hand opened and closed. Ron's eyes bogged out. Sart grunted and drew back. His hand was once more in its normal position at the end of his arm. Ron blinked at him.

"I see," he observed uncertainly. "It is some sort of an optical illusion. Your hand looked as if it were separated from your arm!"

SART sputtered. He almost bellowed. "Don't you see?" he roared. "Ye ages, man! Use your brains! The memory-machine wouldn't help you! This is the one thing, the one object, the one creation of the human intelligence, which can defy even the End! This is the one thing which the End will not destroy!"

Ron shrugged.

"Perhaps you know what you are talking about, Sart, but I don't," he answered. "I came to tell you that there aren't any supplies. Hope has been given up—not that there ever was any—and now even struggling has been abandoned. There is power and there will be supplies at the Dome for everyone who wishes to keep on living until the End. I think most people are cracking. Some will not wait. It is not going to be dignified, I'm afraid. There was one man on the way here who said that he intends to spend what time is left in enjoying himself. He speaks, I suspect, for everyone."

Sart waved his arms excitedly.

"You are an imbecile, Ron!" he roared. "This thing defies the End! It is the only thing man ever made which is proof against time and space and the crackup of a universe."

The outpost, in all its fabric, trembled suddenly. There was a roar like the crack of doom, so monstrous and so terrifying that Ron's every muscle tensed and he clenched his hands and ground his teeth and jerked his head back to stare defiantly overhead as he waited for annihilation. Sart Voorn checked in the middle of a bellow of indignation. They waited in raging impotence to be destroyed.

Then the roaring diminished. It moved away. And Ron suddenly knew what it was and was sick with disgust of himself. And Sart gulped, and began to chuckle mirthlessly.

"That would have been absurd!" he rumbled. "A ship came into atmosphere with its space-drive unshielded. If it had hit the ground we'd have had the End, all right! But it would be an anticlimax to be killed by a crazy space-pilot detonating his ship against a planet when we looked to be murdered in a galaxy smash-up!"

"The fool!" rasped Ron. "Who'd come to Earth now? And why?"

The communicator rattled suddenly.

"Men on Earth," it snarled in a thin, racked tone. "You will surrender to the Men of Erdath instantly, or we will destroy you now! Answer!"

Sart blinked twice.

"Ah! Pirates!" he said in measured calm. "That does it! Now I suspect that men will end as they began, fighting each other tooth and nail upon the planet where they first murdered each other! I wonder what we can contrive for weapons?"

"I start back for the Dome," snapped Ron. "They're madmen, cracked up by the strain of waiting! Maybe they suspect we've found some way to cheat the End! When they discover we haven't found it, they'll go mad again and slaughter everyone in the Dome from disappointment!"

Sart grinned sardonically. "Which might not be unkind save that they might try to find amusement in the process. To be sure you must go back to the Dome. Try to get out all the memory-machine records you can, especially of space-time formulas."

"I am going back to get Hana!" snapped Ron savagely.

CHAPTER III

Fight for Life

UNDER Sart's feet were the runners, designed for comfort in travel on the smooth and age-old ice of Earth. His cold-suit protected him against any conceivable frigidity. But—speeding through the dull-red daylight under a roof of stars, and with the glare of the coming End upon him—there was no ease for him. The motors of the runners ran at their topmost speed. He felt the resistance of the air upon his body, and he bent to reduce it for greater speed still.

When he left Sart's outpost, there was still a glowing trail in the sky where the secondary reactions of the space-drive continued. It marked the line of the space-ship's flight, however, and it was not headed toward the Dome. The madmen from Erdath had not yet found human headquarters, but there was a threat they could make to force the disclosure of its situation. Perhaps they were

making that threat now.

There was a dark speck upon the ice, far away. Don changed his course to meet it. He swept up to it, leaning backward to match his deceleration. The cavalcade was already disorganized. The meaning of the road overhead had been plain to all its members. The communicator on an ice-tractor had snapped out the snarling demand for surrender to the

"We're turning back," one of the skiers told Ron defensively as he came to a stop. "Those crazy men will be taking the Dome and making free with everything in it! We've got to get back!"

"More than that we've got to get as many out as we can!" Ron said. "Turn the tractors around! Follow as fast as you can with them. But don't pull up to the Dome. Stop out of sight, especially if you see another space-ship grounded. With luck, we'll be bringing women who'll need to be carried away. You men on runners, come with me!"

He bent down and speeded up his runner-motors once more. Men came sweeping after him. They trailed, at first, but he slackened speed enough to let them catch up, and then they went on in a close-knit group at speeds which increased when they bent low as he did. He snapped orders, with no authority save the instinct of leadership. His voice was whipped at and torn by the wind of their travel, but when they came in sight of the Dome they had, at least, a concerted plan of action.

The Dome loomed vast and low upon the utterly featureless field of ice which covered all the world. The racing group of men neared it. They saw a vast moving object among the stars. It passed between them and the glare of starlight which meant the End. It was a space-ship, huge and bulbous, with a winking bluish glow from the now-applied baffles of its drive. It was swinging in a vast, slowing turn, to descend close to the Dome.

"We'll beat them in," snapped Ron. "We'll make it before them! If there's going to be a fight, we stay and share it! But if the Dome will be surrendered, we take who we can and make for the tractors. Understood?"

There were growling sounds. Men who had not fought in all their lives—civilized men—reacted with bristling hate to a threat of combat, though they had been numbed with despair before.

The light of the Dome's cold-lock shone brightly. They went hurtling up to it. They ran from their runners into the metalloid

compartment between the outer air and the Dome's interior.

"Keep your runners!" rasped Ron. "Take extra ones from the lock, and cold-suits. If you find anything which will serve for a weapon, bring it!"

He seized a cold-suit for Hana and a pair of runners. He slung a flame-torch about his body as the only object within the lock which might be used as a weapon. The inner door of the cold-lock opened, and they plunged into its interior.

Light surrounded them. Green plants grew. The air was soft and balm, and the environment in the interior of the Dome was that of civilization itself—a meticulously exact reproduction of the semi-tropic environment in which the human race began. The dome-sun was a flaring gas-filled globe which exactly reproduced the human optimum-light. It was the combination of spectrum-colors and intensities which the dull-red sun outside had once given off. The floor was covered with green plants. There were the separate small dwellings of the inhabitants of the Dome, scattered about with intentional irregularity.

RON'S party scattered like fragments of a bomb-shell. He, himself, went swiftly to Hana's living-quarters. She was listening white-faced to the communicator, and ran to him with a gasp of relief when he appeared in the doorway.

"They threatened to drop a detonator-bomb!" she panted, trembling. "It was first suggested that we let them, since the End is coming anyhow, but later the popular decision was to surrender!"

A detonator-bomb, of course, would have done to Earth what a space-ship with unshielded drive would do, colliding head-on with a planet. It would set up a self-propagating explosion, in which every atom of the planet's substance would disintegrate.

"How many voted to surrender?" demanded Ron harshly.

"There were no votes against," she said, shivering. "I would have voted, but no one else did, so I didn't protest."

Ron clicked the transmitter of the instrument upon the wall.

"I am Ron Hort," he said savagely. "I demand general hearing!"

The light went on, indicating that he had facilities for a citizen's privilege of speaking to all his fellow-citizens.

"Those who do not wish to surrender, come to the ship-lock immediately," he said. "You have five minutes or less. Bring or take cold-suits and runners, and bring weapons and food. There will be tractors."

He clicked off, and then kissed Hana.

"Come on," he said grimly. "We'll find out how things stand. If enough come, we'll fight those maniacs who loot with the End at hand. If not, we'll fight the End. Quickly!"

He took her hand and began to run across the floor of the Dome.

There was a crazy confusion everywhere. The Dome was huge, of course, because civilized people do not like to be cramped, and even a twenty-acre space was small enough for the living quarters and activities of five hundred people. But here Ron and Hana passed a man deliberately pouring out drinks of *canyth* for himself and a group of four others. They would be stimulated into a state of utter irresponsibility when the men of Erdath arrived, and would know no fear nor any unhappiness no matter what happened.

Canyth had been useful, in the past, for relieving the strain of brooding by people close to the cracking-point, but it was not good now, when used to enable men or women passively to submit to the inroads of pirates and madmen.

At another place Ron and Hana passed a man and woman lying on the grass together. They were dead. Intentionally. And as they ran through the place of the memory-machines, there was one solitary gray-bearded man sitting tranquilly with a memory-helmet on his head, seeking calmly among the recorded memories of the race for whatever knowledge or opinion he still desired. They saw two men fighting insanely with bare hands, while a woman watched them tensely.

But also they saw cold-suited figures running for their own destination, in most cases dragging or shepherding someone else with them. Ron and the girl cut across the museum-area, where the artifacts from the childhood of humanity had been set up for study—when it was still believed they might disclose some byway of science which the main trend of progress had failed to note.

At last they reached their destination. On this side of the Dome, the expedition's spaceship formed part of the Dome's wall. The giant craft had landed here two years before and the Dome had been built out from one of its air-locks so that the cramped space of

the ship itself might be relieved. The Dome had become the habitation of the expedition, and the ship changed into a store-house.

There was a ramp up to its air-lock, which was open. Already three or four silver-suited men were restlessly awaiting Ron's arrival.

"We want food, and weapons, and fuel," said Ron. "Gather at the outer lock on the far side of the ship. Hurry!"

He waited grimly for the others, so he likewise could direct them. They came. Hana, very pale, struggled into the cold-suit Ron had brought for her. There were shoutings in the cavernous storage-rooms of the grounded space-ship. There was a growling rumble somewhere, and an ice-tractor moved toward the farther lock.

THEN screams sounded suddenly. There was an eruption of wildly gesticulating forms from the cold-lock through which Ron and the others had returned. Whoops and shoutings, half-maniacal, told of the Men of Erdath plunging into the warm and civilized dwelling of the last men on Earth.

Ron watched and waited, sick at heart. He saw figures going to meet the invaders, waving food and drink and luxuries to placate them. He saw a few persons trying hopelessly to hide. But the trickle of those who dared the outer cold in preference to surrender was small—far too small. Fewer than twenty-five men and women, out of five hundred, fled to the lock of the great space-ship, while tumult and howling and—already!—screams filled the Dome.

Ron was about to close the lock, sealing off the ship, when a last hobbling figure came. It was an old man, Dik Morin, who had been most urgently convinced of all the members of the expedition that upon Earth, the race's birthplace, there should be some clue which would lead to its preservation.

Ron waited for him. As the great door closed, he said:

"I do not know whether you can keep up, Dik, but at least you shall have your chance."

"I know the engines of the ship," Dik quavered. "Will you try to take off?"

"An unarmed ship? The Men of Erdath are pirates. Their ship could trail us, surely, and as surely burn us out of space. It would be useless. And Sart says he has found a thing which may defeat the End. We go to him. Whether or not we defeat the End,

we die fighting it."

"Brave words!" Dik puffed. "Find me a cold-suit, Ron. There is something I must find to take, if we are to fight. And there is a switch to throw."

He vanished, limping. Ron led Hana to the other lock, which would open out upon the dreary dull-red day beyond the Dome. He found his followers gathered there. One had an ice-tractor on which the others were piling what oddments they had brought.

"There are pirates outside," a man said quietly to Ron. "One party made for the main entrance to the Dome, and the others came here. They are trying to open the Lock from the outside."

"Good!" said Ron bitterly. "How many of you have weapons? Those who have not, take flame-torches. Since the Dome surrendered tamely, they'll not expect fighting here. We won't warn them, and we'll release the lock when we are ready."

Men scattered again, to bring back torches. They had been made for archeological research beneath Earth's icy covering. They would melt ice swiftly at sixty feet, and turn it to roaring steam at forty.

Grinning savagely, Ron posted his men with precision. As a small boy, like other small boys, he had passed through a stage in which tales of battle and daring meant a great deal to him. And he had discovered in the memory-machine on Bittra, his home planet an ancient record of the artifices and tactics of warfare as reconstructed from records more ancient still. He had learned the principles of war with a boy's enthusiasm and exactness.

Now it was no longer a boy's futile enthusiasm. He set a shock-group before the tractor, to open up with their flame-torches the instant the door rolled wide. Others—women among them—would ride on the tractor and work other torches as it moved. And there was a rear-guard, instructed to fan out to right and left as it emerged from the lock, to drive opponents ahead of it into the concentrated fire from the tractor and so the party could not be taken in rear.

There were impatient fumbings outside. Old Dik Morin came limping with a memory-helmet, with no cable attached. He began to explain something about it, but Ron impatiently had him shoved into a cold-suit and mounted on top of the tractor's load.

He raised his hand, and a man swung the lock-opening lever and ran to his place. The

great door rolled aside and the group of desperate ones surged out without warning, their flame-torches spitting streams of deadly fire.

IT WAS speed that did it. There had been two nearly equal parties of the pirates, divided between the two plain entrances to the Dome. One had gone without opposition into the surrendered place of loot and booty. The other party had fumed impatiently while its leaders tried to open the ship-lock. It dwindled, most of its members deserting, as time was lost. There was now merely a surly, fuming group of no more than forty Men of Erdath, already uncomfortable because of the inadequacy of their protection against Earth's cold.

The flame-stabbing rush of men and women and a heat-flash-spouting tractor took them by surprise. Five or six went down before they began to realize what had happened. Before the others could grasp the situation, those from within the Dome were in their midst. There were horrible screams in Earth's thin atmosphere. There were detonations of exploded weapons. There was a minute of inferno. Then Ron's party was through.

Ron panted orders as he raged with the afterguard. They robbed fallen enemies of weapons. When Men of Erdath who had been straggling toward the other entrance turned at the tumult and loosed bolts at the fugitives, Ron and two others knelt and, fumbling with the unfamiliar instruments, poured blasting bursts at their enemies until the party from the Dome had mounted its runners and was off across the icy waste, at the highest speed the ice-tractor could maintain.

The rearguard trio imitated them and went sliding swiftly in their wake before yet other pirates on foot could run to a dangerous nearness.

Again there was a cavalcade in motion across the ice. There was a single tractor, heavily loaded, with men about it gliding on long runners like those of sleds. This guard also wore metallic-seeming suits and masks which transferred all the heat and moisture of exhaled breath to the incoming frigid air. And this cavalcade made a wide, wide circle to get on course for its destination, and men fanned out and found the three waiting tractors obeying Ron's orders of hardly more than an hour before.

The whole group turned once more and

moved across the ice toward Sart's outpost, where—alone upon Earth and solitary in the universe—one man labored doggedly to find a way to defeat the End.

As they traveled, the dull-red sun sank. There remained only bright stars which were a curtain hiding the destruction now racing toward this remnant of humanity. But the pale, malevolent glare which was the symbol of the End still hung poised above them.

CHAPTER IV

Desperate Measures

SART VOORN'S outpost was crowded with fugitives. Its living-space had been designed for Sart and his wife, and perhaps for such other few persons as might come to help in the task Sart had set himself. Twelve additional women and eighteen additional men made it crowded.

Curiously enough, though, the atmosphere of brooding despair which had filled the Dome was lightened here. Men and women had reverted to savagery and fought for their lives and freedom. They had had a purpose and they had struggled for it, and they had won. That triumphant accomplishment was a stimulus whose effect remained even when they were removed to the definitely primitive conditions of the outpost.

The women, the lot of them, remained in the living quarters, and their voices made a continuous chattering sound. The men were crowded into the work-space, where for comfort they kept on their cold-suits and merely loosened them and removed their masks.

Sart demonstrated the enigmatic thing he had discovered. He puffed out his cheeks importantly.

"This is what I have to show you!" he told them pompously. "This bit of rusted metal looks like nothing whatever. It is actually an ancient alloy, brass, which was known to the ancients before they knew atomic power, before they knew writing, before there were memory-machines and some say even before they knew electricity. Its composition does not matter. The important thing is that it is the base for something which the ancients evidently knew how to make, but which they never managed to make use of.

But we have a use for it! By all the ages, we have a use for it! Look!"

Men stared as he thrust his hand into the space above the corroded metal base, and as his hand appeared six feet from the end of his arm and the fingers moved and wriggled—and then reappeared in their normal position when he drew back. He had Ron stand at one side of the phenomenon—to Ron it seemed that they were but two feet apart—and handed him an object through the space, which to the men watching from the side seemed an impossible distance.

"The secret is that what I have found is the very opposite of something," boomed Sart. "It is less than nothing. It is the negation of space! And yet our scientists have theorized about it for centuries and never discovered it. The ancients had it!"

Old Dik Morin blinked at him.

"It is a byway of science," he observed complacently, "which I said we would find on earth."

"But what are we going to do with it?" a dry voice asked.

"First let us try to understand it," snorted Sart. "What it is, is simple! Imagine a gigantic sun, of such mass that it almost—but not quite—closes space about itself. The scientists have talked about such things since the ages began. Let so much additional mass be added, and it will wrap space about itself and disappear. It will continue to exist, but in a closed universe having no contact with this one. Now, we imagine such a sun, and that we are in a space-ship driving for it at any speed we choose to assume. As we near it, it suddenly acquires its extra, needed mass. Perhaps a meteor strikes it. Perhaps an unfortunate space-ship ahead of us touches its surface. It has acquired the mass it needs to fold space about itself. What happens?"

"It disappears," someone said.

"True—very true!" Sart nodded, puffing zestfully. "But what happened to the space it occupied?"

He gazed about him triumphantly.

"That must disappear also! It is wrapped up with the mass itself, and like the mass it becomes part of a small universe we have no faintest hope of reaching! Because when we, in our space-ship, reach the spot where the sun should be, it is not there! We go on—and we find ourselves behind the place where the sun's substance should have ended! There is no longer any distance between

those two places. That distance was filled with the sun's mass. It has vanished with that mass. A certain amount of space, of distance, has ceased to be!"

THERE was momentary puzzlement. Then one by one—here and there dubiously—men nodded agreement.

"Now, that is exactly what the ancients made here!" boomed Sart. "Above this mouldy bit of metal, two paces of distance have ceased to exist. Where you stand, it seems that three paces of distance separate Ron and myself. If we walked upon straight parallel lines toward you, that would be so. But here, where we are, two paces of distance has been subtracted from the scheme of things in every direction. Here we are only one pace apart. For instance—" he bent over suddenly—"where I am, there is no distance between my head and my body!"

A startled murmur. He had bent over, and his head appeared close beside Ron, while his body remained where it had been. He straightened up, beaming.

"Now, this is the one thing which can defeat the End," he told them vehemently. "It is an artifact. It can be carried about because it is somehow fastened to this brass base. The base is merely cast metal—X-rays prove it. Yet it supports something which has been able to close space about itself as if it had the mass of all our cosmos! Yet it is surely not mass which has made this small closed universe! It is a machine, a device of some sort! If we learn to duplicate it—"

The communicator snarled:

"Men of Earth have killed Men of Erdath! We will pardon one man who returns and leads us to his fellows! One! If none comes, when we are done with Earth we will drop a detonator-bomb behind us as we leave! Be quick!"

Faces hardened.

"Go on, Sart," Ron said evenly.

"Ye ages!" exploded Sart. "Is it not plain? If we can close space about our space-ship, can the End destroy it? Of course not! It is the one thing men have made and can which will defy the End!"

There was a pause.

"I brought a memory-helmet, Sart," Old Dik Morin said happily. "Before we left the Dome, I threw a switch inside the ship which connects the ship's memory-machine to a special communicator. We can consult the ship's memory-machine at a distance by

means of the helmet."

"Ha!" said Sart. "That is good—perhaps. But now I need men to sit and talk and think with me, and somehow contrive a way to make the device inside this machine cease to operate. I must somehow disable a machine which the End cannot harm, so we may find out how it was made. Who volunteers to work with me?"

"Wait a bit!" Ron said quickly. "I am no scientist, but today I found out that at need I'm a fighting man. And there is fighting that needs to be done. Don't everybody volunteer to work with Sart! We need some to work on the Men of Erdath." His voice became convincingly confident. "Because we will need to have a space-ship to close space around when the trick of it is learned."

He looked about him. The response was gratifying. Men who had spent their lives without hope now found the prospect of battle an excellent stimulant.

"We've several weapons the Erdathians used," Ron went on. "Though they have captured ice-runners since the Dome surrendered, they're not apt to be skilled in their use. I suggest that those who wish to fight take food and that we set out to make trouble for the pirates at once."

There was a grim stirring. Eight men nodded to him significantly. Others crowded about the anomaly Sart had described as a closed universe. Sart drew aside and let them fumble with it as they would. He plucked at Ron's arm.

"Hah, I do not know which of us is the greater scoundrel," he rumbled under his breath. "You attempt the impossible in the way of fighting, which none of us knows anything about, while I try to break open something even a smashing universe cannot crack. But it is necessary to insist that there is hope. Sali cannot live without it, and for her I do what I do. I have not the confidence I pretend, Ron."

"Who has?" Ron said without moving his lips.

"Scoundrel!" whispered Sart gleefully.

"You lie too, eh? We are partners in crime, to soothe folk like children. But still—" indignation crept even into his whisper—"there is a chance there, if only we can see it!"

RON went into the living quarters of the women. Hana smiled at him. There was a change in her expression. It was altogether new. She came quickly to his side.

"Ron!" she said breathlessly. "What shall you do now?"

He smiled at her.

"If I can find a place not crowded with other people, I am going to kiss you."

She flushed.

"I think that presently—I mean, what are your plans?"

"To make trouble," said Ron briefly. "If I can get those madmen confused enough, there will come a moment I can take advantage of. Meanwhile I think I shall enjoy trying to kill pirates."

Her eyes upon him were soft. Civilized people act upon intellectualized motives. They decide what is wise, and sometimes do it. But when they are swayed by purest primitive instincts they are usually happier. Hana was responding to one of the most ancient of all known human impulses—admiration of a proved warrior.

"Come here a moment, Ron," said Hana, with elaborate casualness. "There's something I want to show you."

He followed her. She led the way through two rooms and the greenery-space of Sart's living-quarters—no civilized person could imagine having neither plants nor flowers somewhere about him—and past the cooking-machine to a doorway. The door opened, she stepped through it, and he followed. The door closed behind them. He saw the food-bins forming the back of the machine which prepared meals and served them ready for consumption.

"This is where the supplies are put in the food-machines, Ron," Hana said.

Ron glanced about. It seemed irrelevant. Then he saw her expression. Her eyes were no longer haunted and unhappy, as they had been in the Dome. Then she'd reasoned sanely that for them to be happy would be bitterness because it must end so soon. Now her eyes were anxious and hopeful.

"It is a very nice place," said Ron judicially. "I agree that it isn't crowded."

So he kissed her—thoroughly, satisfactorily. And she evidently liked it.

"I don't know why I feel differently, Ron. Nothing is changed much. The End is still coming. But if you want me to marry you—if I can make you happy for what time is left, I am ready."

When they went back to the crowded places in which the other women chattered, Hana's face was calm. Now her eyes were no longer filled with sad foreboding.

And, just as she had responded to primitive prowess, so Ron reacted to feminine admiration by an enormously increased urge to accomplish. Even before he left her, he had an idea. He went restlessly to old Dik Morin and demanded the helmet which was tuned to the memory-machine on the ship. He sat down and turned it on and carefully explored the memory-files he needed.

Those files were, of course, the records which had supplanted printed books. Wearing a helmet, one could explore an entire library, cross-indexed as thoroughly as the memories of a living brain and giving the same sensations as the examination of a personal, individual memory.

The memory-machines made the memories of ten thousand or a hundred thousand minds available to an individual. They had made the achievements of a galactic civilization possible. No person even could begin to learn all the facts of even a sub-branch of a given science. But, wearing a memory-helmet, he had them all at his command.

And, using a helmet for research, the facts he found and used became his individual memories too, so that education was simply a matter of making use of facilities provided for accomplishment. No two persons ever quite gathered exactly the same education. But every man remembered what he found useful of all the knowledge stored up by the race—and every man had all knowledge available to him as one of his rights as a citizen.

QUICKLY Ron Hort delved deeply into the matter of weapons, and of Erdath, and refreshed his personal memories of ancient space-warfare. He went to the eight who had volunteered to fight, and sent them to use the memory-helmet in turn. He examined the captured pirate weapons with a new familiarity. But Sart's co-researchers were impatient to use the helmet before the last of Ron's men was through.

Sart Voorn came to him, rumbling, as he waited for the last man to finish his directed study.

"I am going mad!" growled Sart. "My helpers have no originality! They suggest a hundred things, and I have already tried every one! I shall set them at work to try them all again. Perhaps a slight difference in procedure will make a difference, but I feel that we are only fumbling."

"You've got to solve it, Sart!" Ron said

urgently. "It has to be done!"

Sart grunted.

"I saw Hana just now, smiling. All these women have a different air. That explains your energy! We go back some billions of years in our actions, and we reacquire the optimism of infants. Humanity does not change. Every other known species of plants and animals has changed during human history, but not man!"

"Why should we change?" Ron protested. "Animals respond to changes in environment which make them need to fit it. We men make changes in our environment to make it fit us. There is no survival value in a change in men."

"Evidently the value lies in being able to revert to savagery at need!" said Sart. "And I am irritated even as I approve. It is not rational for us to hope, but I swear to you Ron that I begin to hope! About the thing I discovered, that is. Your problem seems to me impossible. There are at least two hundred armed pirates and an armed spaceship, looting the Dome and ready to drop a detonator-bomb on Earth as they leave. You have eight men and hand-weapons to defeat them with."

Ron nodded.

"And I'm worrying only over your problem," he said drily. "I know what I'm going to do, but your task is beyond imagining. If we each succeed—ah!"

The last of his eight men stood up from the memory-helmet and nodded to him.

"We'll go!" said Ron.

CHAPTER V

Ancient Tactics

IN THE way to the exit, through the living-quarters, their intention of an armed excursion was made evident by their runners and their weapons. The wife of one of the eight men kissed him. Other women—despite the strong tradition against public displays of affection—told their men goodbye with a new pride and a new air of unquestioning confidence. Hana put her hand on Ron's arm. It trembled a little.

"You might not come back, Ron!" she said desperately.

"I will!" he assured her.

But he kissed her openly. By tradition it

was almost a public avowal of marriage.

The eight formed a compact group as they sped across the ice-pack. They had a definite technic for maximum speed, squatting down as low as possible and in a deep V formation, to cut down wind-resistance as the small motors thrust them on. Ron had a moment's annoyed feeling that there should be more power for higher speed, but this was no time for technical alterations.

He outlined his plan as they went swooping through the starlit darkness. It was still night, though the sun's dull glow made no great difference. Its heat was enough to keep Earth's air from congealing altogether, but that was all. The moon still floated in the sky despite the old prediction of its destruction, but it gave off no light, either. It was a dark space among a myriad stars. Only by staring at it could one detect a faint, faint tawnyish which was dull red sunshine at second hand.

There was zest in the wild sweep through darkness, though, with wind whining faintly past the cold-suit masks. Despite its actual length the time seemed short before the Dome's bulk bulged upward against the sharp edge of the horizon.

The group of fighting-men swerved, then, and swept round it below the curvature of the icepack. They kept on until they were behind the Dome. Then they sped in. They saw the great ship of which the Dome was an extension, but that could and must wait. They went racing close beside the Dome's closing wall. In half a minute the Erdathian ship lay before them, grounded a bare quarter-mile from the Dome's lighted entrance and now looming huge and misshapen upon the ice.

Had they come from another direction they might have been seen and fired on. But they shot toward the pirate ship from the surrendered Dome, where nearly all of its crew held revel. It was not pleasant to think of what was going on within the Dome.

The coup went off like clockwork. One instant the pirate ship's landing lock was empty and dimly lighted. The next, silver-suited fighters were swarming into the lock. A door clanged open. They poured through it.

And then the cold, thin air yielded to small sounds which traveled away in its stillnesses and were lost. None heard them in the Dome, surely. But the plating of the ship glowed white-hot in four places, and then

spat coruscating sparks as punctures appeared. There were sudden jettings of cloud-like vapor,—warm moist air from the interior and at a pressure higher than the atmosphere of Earth, pouring out of smashed vision-ports and forming clouds which instantly froze to ice. Two minutes—three—four—five. . . .

The silvery-suited figures poured out again. They carried burdens. They swept away into the darkness before there was any alarm from the Dome.

A short time later, while his followers looked consciously modest and consciously hard-bitten, Ron Hort made his report to the rest of the party in Sart Voorn's quarters.

"We smashed into the pirate ship and set to work," he said. "There were only a few pirates to fight and no discipline. Practically every one of the gang was in the Dome. We shot down the few we did see, and every one of us knew just what to do and how to do it, thanks to the memory-helmet, Dik! Somebody else ripped their drive-tubes with an atom-torch. We punctured the hull in four places, grabbed all the weapons we could and used some of them to smash all the others we could find—especially the ship's armament. We left that ship useless for flight without elaborate repairs, and going down fast to earth-temperature, which won't help them any. I think we've made it certain that they won't find it easy to sail away and leave a detonator-bomb behind them!"

WOMEN'S eyes glowed with pride, Hana and the women who were sentimentally interested in the fighting men. Other women looked envious. Primitive instincts were definitely to the fore in Sart's outpost, now.

"But the pirates can still take our ship, the one we came in," one woman complained anxiously.

"Not likely," said Ron. "I myself I went into that vessel through a spaceboat lock. I cut control-cables where they'd have trouble locating the breaks, but where we can mend them in a few minutes. It wouldn't be easy to get that ship aloft, either."

"But there is danger that they may come to this place, Ron!" Sart rumbled.

Ron nodded. "But we've worked out some tricks in case they do. What I'm hoping for is that we'll be ready to take back the Dome by the time they want to try! When we do, our best course would be to have them

marching here at the moment we retake the Dome."

The communicator screamed suddenly. A maniacal voice bellowed from it. The fury it expressed was pure madness, and the words were unthinkably foul. The Men of Erdath had turned pirate, to begin with, to try to forget the coming End. But now their piracy was done with. They were imprisoned upon a dead and frozen planet, with no further enormities to commit for forgetfulness save only, perhaps, revenge.

Their first reaction to the discovery of their ship's helplessness was a lunatic rage, expressed in phrases which prompted Ron to reach up and turn the communicator off.

Sart took Ron's arm and steered him out into the working-space, despite Ron's impatient wish to go to Hana for such evidence of pride in him as her eyes promised.

"I was right," said Sart gloomily. "Ron, you have done your task too well. If I know men, those demented pirates will turn to whoever may be left alive in the Dome. They will make someone lead them here. They will do it soon, and we are not ready. We have not even begun to crack that pocket universe. My volunteer helpers have only torn down each other's suggestions and have not agreed upon even a single old trick to try. It takes time to solve a problem."

"Very well, we'll make those pirates pay for their revenge," Ron said savagely. "They'll have runners, but they can't use them as we do. We'll lose some men, perhaps, attacking them on the march, but they'll lose more! They will follow the marks of our tractors on the ice. We'll lay mines in the ice to explode as they pass over them."

Sart raised his bushy brows.

"My good military men, your brain is fertile of expedients. If you could only contrive a stratagem . . . Hah! By all the ages, we will do it. I have tested every trick of science, with no result. If any known force, applied in any known way, would crack that thing, the End would crack it too, anyhow. All I have done proves that it is what we need, but we cannot have it. Science fails. We try the art of war. Come now! Give me a stratagem."

He seized Ron's arm firmly as he turned impatiently away.

"I mean it!" roared Sart indignantly. "I need a new way of thinking, and every brain in this place runs in the same grooves as my own. Hana will wait. Come and look

and listen! I know of all the forces. Con-
trive an attack upon this thing such as blind
nature and blinder civilians would never
dream of. Plan a siege—a trick—an artifice!
Come with me!"

He dragged Ron to where the enigmatic
anomaly in space hovered motionless above
its corroded base. He thrust Ron into a seat.
He paced up and down before him, expound-
ing every possible objection, every possible
attack, every conceivable way of looking at
the problem. But the unalterable fact re-
mained that there was nothing for any force
to operate upon. There was nothing to which
any energy could be applied.

Ron set his jaw and listened. Twice Hana
came to where she could see him. An enor-
mous urgency filled him. Somewhere beyond
the overhead curtain of stars, ravening an-
nihilation sped toward him and Hana. A
mere few miles away, men at least half-mad
were planning ferociously the most maniacal
of vengeance upon him and Hana. And
Sart, beefy and positive and sweating, march-
ing nervously back and forth before him, and
flinging before him scheme after scheme,
principle after principle, force after force
which might be applied to break down any
conceivable barrier formed in space—but
useless in this case because the thing to be
broken down was the absence of space.

AT LONG last Ron looked up with a jolt.
"I just thought of something," he said
apologetically. "You said to think of a mili-
tary trick. I've been translating all these
ideas into military terms as you went along
because I filled my head with such stuff
when I was a boy. I refreshed myself with a
good deal of it with the memory-helmet just
now. It occurs to me that every one of the
ideas you've had has been either a frontal
or a flank attack. Does the assertion sound
insane?"

"Nothing is insane," said Sart hopelessly,
"if it is a new approach. But what is there
besides frontal and flank attacks?"

"There used to be," said Ron, groping in
his mind, "what was called a pincers move-
ment. It was an attack in two directions at
once. The troops in between were forced to
face two ways at the same time. And in-
filtration is a complicated form of pincers
attack, you might say. If you can get a part
of your force inside the enemy lines, the
trick is accomplished."

Sart stared at him, frozen. He seemed to

be stricken with an abrupt tense paralysis.
Then he bellowed:

"Fool! Dolt! Half-wit! Idiot!"

He went panting to the sidewall. He ripped
down coils of wire. With shaking hands he
began to connect them to apparatus in a
complex but systematic manner. As he
worked, he swore furiously.

"We did not see it!" he raged. "We bab-
bled to each other and we did not see it! We
did not realize that this closed universe is
different from all other closed universes, be-
cause it is fastened to a metal base. We
thought of suns which collapsed space about
themselves. We did not think of something
as simple as a hatrack base, which communi-
cates with the interior of a pocket universe.
Ah, imbeciles!"

He flung a switch, and a spark leaped an
arc of six inches, filling the work-space of
the outpost with crackling sounds. He swore
again and went back to his labor.

"Infiltration!" he snapped. "Pincers move-
ments! We would batter at nothing—at less
than nothing—and wonder why we did not
come upon something! That is what the End
will do. Never before has there been a closed
space with communication left to another—
the metal shaft from this absurd base! Never
before has it been possible to establish a
strain between two universes! To infiltrate!
But now—ha!"

He made his final connection to a metal
plate he flung to the floor. He went down on
hands and knees and moved the corroded,
dusty-seeming base to position on that metal
plate. He rose, and sweat stood out on his
face. All bluster suddenly left him.

"If this does not work, it is because I have
not a high enough potential," he said in a
sudden seeming humility. "I have put high-
tension potential inside the pocket universe,
through its base. I put the opposite potential
outside the pocket universe, through the air.
I make a condenser, with warped space as
my dielectric . . . I make a new strain in
space. . . ."

He gulped suddenly. His hand moved.
There was an abrupt arc-ing flare, and then
the humming of an overburdened generator.
A fuse blew instantly. Then there was
silence.

Above the corroded metal base there was
a very simple but strange mass of crystal
rods and wound bare wire. That was all.

Sart looked. He reached in, snapped off a
switch of archaic design, and then made a

gesture, signifying that their labors were finished.

"This is it," he said unsteadily. "A man made it and took pride in the device, and nothing at all ever happened about it. Earth was abandoned five hundred million years ago, my friends, and the city under our feet was abandoned before that, and there is no way to guess how remote from us was the man who made this."

Ron bent down. A soiled bit of paper had fallen from among the crystal rods and wires above the corroded brazen base. The wires were fresh and new. The paper, too, was new, but the lines upon it were scrawling and difficult to make out.

"The memory-helmet," commanded Ron. "This must be writing."

SOMEONE brought the helmet and put it on Ron Hort's head. He searched through the files of ancient knowledge in the memory-machine in the space-ship that had brought all present to the Earth. It was writing; handwriting. But it was not like the copperplate examples the memory-machine preserved. Ron found it necessary to guess and surmise to make meanings out of a part of the scribbling—which, at that, was probably a perfectly normal script which had caused contemporaries of the writer no inconvenience.

". . . ade this machine which when energized cannot exist. . . . To test the time-rate I ent . . . nd myself mil . . . in the future . . . rate is inverse ratio to size of cos . . . one second eq . . . ion years. The people are kindly and I . . . ent to live h . . . chine is useless to them . . . atomic power . . . I shall turn . . . their amusement . . . museum. . . ."

Ron read it aloud in a dry voice.

"Guessing," said Ron evenly. "The man made it and found he'd not only closed space but found a new time-rate. And he liked the people when he came out, and they could think of no use for the machine, so he turned it on to make an exhibit for their museum. But I would say that we have a use for it."

Sart looked about him with burning eyes.

"You heard that," he said in an exhausted voice, as if his own triumph had worn him out completely, "We have found the way to defeat the End. You can see the design of this thing. It is a variant—an extraordinarily simple variant—of the winding for a strained-

space lens. But this winding creates the strain outside of itself—and it is a space-warp which creates a miniature universe. We could open this because it still communicated with our universe through its base. But when we have made windings about our space-ship and turned on the current, there will be no such weak spot in the closed space it will create. There can be no pincers movement or infiltrative tactic that the End can try!"

He swallowed. Then he boomed angrily:

"Any of us can do the thing now. You know it. But first we have to fight! Volunteers or not, every one of us is a fighting man from now until Ron is through with us. We can beat the End, but first we must rid ourselves of those lunatic pirates who would wipe out the human race. Take weapons!"

CHAPTER VI

World of Hope

ABOUT them men began to stir. There was exultation, and almost hysterical laughter from the women, when they heard the news, and Sart wiped sweat from his forehead.

"Ye ages, I am become a coward!" he said feverishly to Ron. "Now that we can hope, I feel it in my bones and know by every instinct that those fiends are on the way here now!"

"I hope so," Ron said. "We need to recapture the Dome now, and we certainly don't want the main batch of the pirates there! If they haven't started here, we'll have to lure them into an expedition, and we'll have to do all the damage we can to any of them on the march, by the way. But we had better get ready, now. We have tractors and runners. We will need explosives, but I think that can be handled. Hm! We might move in the quarter of an hour."

Sart sweated.

"What a thing to depend on! Fighting! To save the human race!"

But Ron had left him. The eight who had followed him before believed implicitly in him, now. He spoke to them crisply. Then he went in search of Hana.

It was not a quarter of an hour, but nearly thirty minutes of confusion before the out-

post was deserted. One tractor carried the object that had spent perhaps two billion earth-years in a universe of its own, where the time-rate was such that a second within it equalled perhaps a million years on Earth. Old Dik rode on that tractor, too, and several of the women, and the other three tractors had been lightened.

They left the entrance-light of the outpost still glowing, to lead anyone who came that way a few more miles astray. The tractors, sliding along the ice on their curious treads, started off into the darkness with easily gliding men all about. But this time the gliding men were armed.

They did not head directly for the Dome. They went a long way off to one side. Then they moved on steadily through the starlight. But Ron and four others made wide, scouting sweeps, bent low and moving at breathtaking speed over the ice which glowed palely.

A long time after their start they found the raging, marching Men of Erdath. There were very many of them, and they were three-quarters of the way to the outpost. Unable to move their ship, they had taken cold-suits and runners from the Dome and set out to destroy as horribly as possible the fugitives who had dared to strike back at them.

But they moved slowly. At no time were they all upon their feet. Not only unaccustomedness to the runners, but drugs and drunkenness and the insane irresponsibility of *canyth* combined to make them a straggling, babbling, cursing mob. But they had ice-tractors in their midst, bearing foodstuffs—and of course stimulants—and the majority of their weapons.

Five crouching, silvery figures speared toward them out of nowhere, moving silently and like the winds which no longer blew on Earth. They flashed out of the night, and they were actually unseen until they swerved and poured in continuous, massed, and deadly fire upon the undisciplined mob from a distance of barely forty paces, while traveling at eighty miles an hour past their flank.

They were gone before they could be fired upon, and they left screaming casualties behind them. In the congealing cold of Earth, nowadays, a torn cold-suit meant a dead man.

Ron and his four remained lost in the vast flat waste for a long enough time to let the mob lose its close packed defensive grouping. It lost time, too, with its casualties. Then

Ron made another slashing, lightning-like attack. More casualties for the Men of Erdath ensued.

Ron Hort's men went back, rejoining their own tractors far below the horizon. There were new weapons for them there. Even as the tractors crawled upon their way, men had worked clumsily in the bitter cold to contrive certain devices Ron described. Power-runners were their foundation. Explosive had been improvised—with air so close to its congealing point, liquid air was simple enough, and mere liquid fuel sprayed into it made a detonating compound of ghastly power—with improvised fuses completing the devices.

THEY launched four of the racing things toward the cavalcade of pirates at the same instant, and turned and sped back toward the empty outpost. Howls of rage arose as they were seen. But the men of Erdath could not chase them successfully. The pirates were clumsy upon the power-runners. They did not see the low dark things come slithering and hurtling across the ice, things which were actually ice-torpedoes, smaller and lower than men, and much more deadly. They were unexpected. They were unnoticed. They struck.

One of them crashed into a tumbled pirate in the act of trying to rise to his feet after his unsteady legs had tripped him. That pirate and all others in a twenty-yard circle about him simply vanished. So did the surface of the ice. There was a monstrous crater in its stead. And the damage went beyond even the area of the colossal flare caused by quarts of civilization's most concentrated fuel burning instantaneously in a superabundant supply of oxygen supplied by liquid air.

The three other ice-torpedoes were as successful. One struck an ice-tractor. It detonated. The others found targets. Men were flung about like jackstraws. . . .

There were only scattered, dazed, incredulous figures left with a single running tractor when the thing was over, and the tractor tumbled into a bomb-crater and ceased to run. Another savage dash by racing, ruthless figures into the scattered and now doubly lunatic pirates reduced them to panic-stricken individuals who presently fired crazily at each other.

It was horrible. The more determined pirates went onward, because there was the

light of the outpost now visible, and that promised something tangible to come to grips with. Few of them, anyhow, would have been able to retrace their way to the Dome.

It is one thing to roam the void in a space-ship equipped with astrogation devices almost human in their seeming intelligence and more than human in the precision of their working. It is something else to find yourself tottering on unfamiliar motored runners, with *canyth* or drugs or drink dying out in you, shocked by the fact of savage resistance and more than dazed by the slaughter of your fellows.

Some of the pirates rushed to attack the lighted outpost, because there was nothing else for them to do. There was no defense. It was empty.

Of the hundred and eighty men who had started out, forty finally crowded into the living quarters that had been abandoned to them.

A dozen, all told, eventually straggled back to the Dome, to be shot down when they staggered into the cold-lock. The rest were dead or wandering upon the sea of ice, hopeless, without destination, under a dull-red sun which seemed perpetually pursued by the cold pale glare which was the symbol of the End.

The few pirates who remained in the Dome were there because they were too stupefied by revelry to take part in the expedition. They were killed by the shamed, shaken, tormented survivors of the Dome's population when Ron and Sart and their followers came into the Dome with arms in their hands and took over.

In twelve hours the great space-ship which had spawned the Dome broke free from it and lifted into space. As it cleared the dead Earth's thinning atmosphere, figures in space-suits crawled out of lifeboat locks and—clinging to the plating by magnetic shoes—began to weave a lattice-like pattern of wires about the whole exterior hull. The wires were strung on swiftly-welded up-rights.

And inside, men feverishly studied an artifact from the remotest antiquity of the human race, and calculated feverishly in terms of space and time.

Twenty-two hours after their return to the Dome, they tested the winding they had made about the space-ship's hull. All the monstrous power of the ship's generators surged

into the lattice-work. And when the power went on—to those in the space-ship—the stars went out.

They did not turn the power off, because calculation had determined that if the time-rate in a closed universe is in inverse ratio to its size, then in the closed universe they had made, one second of time was equal to eighty thousand years in the universe without. And the End would last for astronomical periods, and after it other hundreds and thousands of millions of years must pass before the galaxies of the universe, fallen back together in one inconceivable catastrophe, would have re-exploded to a stage suitable again for human life.

SUCH far-flung atoms from the cosmic detonation would have to fly outward, and they must coalesce into suns and planets and island universes, and life would have to come into being. Billions of years must pass in the old, dead universe before it became again a young new one. But time did pass, at the rate of eighty thousand years without, for every second within the man-made universe.

It went by at the rate of two hundred and eighty-eight million years in the great universe, for every hour on the clock of the space-ship's control-room.

So they left the power on for three months. And then they cut it off.

It was all quite successful. A very normal universe seemed to surround them when they looked. They were actually within the confines of an island universe. There were stars by uncountable millions all about, and there were those faint and nebulous patches of light which told of other galaxies unthinkably remote, and the diverse colorings of the stars made it plain that this was a young universe. There were few white dwarfs and no red ones.

The memory-helmets went busily into use, because many men on the space-ship had to act as astronomers, now, and choose a suitable planet for a landing. Ron Hort waited restlessly in the control-room as the reports came in.

Hana entered, and smiled warmly at him. Somehow there had been infinite confidence in the space-ship during the period of the artificial universe's existence. But now that they were again in a great universe—a new one—the confidence had changed to knowledge. Hana sat down beside Ron and slipped

her hand into his.

"It's practically decided," said Ron. "There's a Sol-type sun some twenty light-years away. It has planets, and presumably one or more of them are suitable for colonization. We're going to head that way unless there's concerted objection."

Hana smiled more brightly than ever.

"Sart and Sali are quarreling a little," she said confidentially. "Sart insists that he foresaw everything when he decided to defy fate and have their little boy. Now he's fretting because Sali laughs at him. But he's pleased, too, because she can laugh.

She couldn't—before."

"I can think of more important things to talk about," he said meditatively. "This is the beginning of things. We've worlds to conquer and galaxies to explore and science to preserve and extend."

"Oh, yes," agreed Hana, though she looked at him oddly. "There are all those things."

"But besides," Ron told her, "if Sart were like I am, and felt as I do, there's another subject more important still."

"What?" asked Hana.

He whispered in her ear.

She kissed him.

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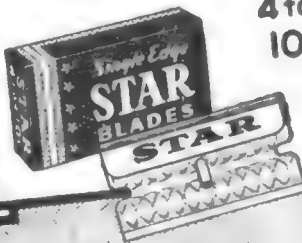
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GRIM RENDEZVOUS

By ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

Johnny Rober, discredited physicist, stages a desperate sky venture when destruction is rushing toward the Earth!

IF THE Earth's surface were not three parts sea to one part land it would be futile even to hope that Johnny Rober still lives. On the other hand, it is virtually certain that no one at all would be alive today had not Johnny been three parts incorrigible scamp to one part scientific genius—and wholly in love with the black-haired, black-eyed minx from whom I have most of this story.

To set the tale down as it came to me, in bits and pieces, would be confusing. I shall tell it therefore as though I had been invisibly present at each event as it occurred, and I shall tell it as objectively as I can.

It began on a Sunday morning with the two of them alone in Midwest University's Electronics Buildings. Kitty Gardlane, of course, had no right to be there. Neither in fact had Johnny, for all that he was 90%

responsible for the advanced design of the radar installation before which he sat. He was only a probational instructor in physics and he had not obtained the Director's permission to use the apparatus for private research.

That worried Kitty. "Why didn't you, Johnny? Why didn't you get his okay?"

"Oh, you know how Gardey is." Johnny didn't look up as he mumbled his answer but she was well worth looking at; slim, long-legged, her tan sweater moulding curves definitely more entrancing than those on the pages of the astronomical tome over which his carrot-topped head was bent. "I'd have had to tell him what I plan and he'd still be spoiling good paper with figures and formulae demonstrating that it's impossible."

That Johnny himself was not hard to look at is attested by the heavy registration in his classes of coeds one hardly would suppose to be interested in Nuclear Physics or the Theory of Microwaves. He wasn't handsome, not with his pug nose and too-wide mouth, but the corners of his blue eyes crinkled with puckish humor and he possessed a slow, chuckling grin that endeared him even to his own sex.

"What's that, Johnny?" Kitty had to raise her voice to be heard over the deepening whine of the radar's generator. "What are you up to?"

He moved a dial a fraction of a mil, jotted down the new setting in his notebook.

"Whether Professor Charles D. Gardlane thinks it can be done or not, I'm going to bounce an echo off the planet Venus."

"Why should Gardey think you can't? The Army reached the moon, didn't they? And they're talking about trying for Mars."

"Why Mars, when Venus is several million miles nearer Earth just now? Because Mars has no atmosphere, they say, while Venus is surrounded by a thick layer of clouds. I intend to prove it can be done and that they're wrong."

"Oh, Johnny! Why must you always be trying to prove someone wrong? I thought you'd learned your lesson when you gave that talk disputing Gardey's pet hypothesis about the—the—"

"Orbital patterns of protons."

"Yes. And he shot your paper so full of holes the Society laughed you off the platform. If he hadn't pleaded for you, the Faculty would have fired you right then and there, and not another university in the

country would have given you a job."

JOHNNY made another careful adjustment. "Yeah. I'll be a long time living that down. But—"

"But now you're repeating the same kind of nonsense." Kitty was perilously near tears. "You're letting Gardey down and you're letting me down. I love you, Johnny. I'd be happy to work with you and starve with you while you're rebuilding your reputation. But I can't face being afraid all my life that everything we've worked for will blow up in our faces because you have to show that you're smarter than anyone else. I can't and won't marry you if you keep on this way."

"Whoa, baby." Johnny was up off his stool but Kitty evaded his embrace and faced him, head high, eyes blazing. Johnny grinned at her, a bit crookedly.

"You're right, honey. You're dead right." He looked like a small boy contritely admitting some childish naughtiness. "I'll be good from now on. I solemnly promise you I won't say anything about this test, work or fail, and I won't ever try another that isn't approved by higher authority. Satisfied?"

"Well-ll, maybe."

"That's settled then. Five minutes more and we'll go out and celebrate."

"Five minutes." Kitty wasn't quite sure what was settled. "Why five minutes?"

"Because that's all I need to finish. See that scope." He pointed to a porthole-like lens in the radar's vertical instrument board. Across the otherwise darkened glass a line of green light vibrated like a plucked string. "Two pips—jags in that line—precisely four minutes, fifty-two and three tenths seconds apart and I'll know my signal has traveled more than twenty-seven million miles to Venus and another twenty-seven millions miles back. Even if I can't tell anyone I'll know . . . Wait! I've got a wonderful idea. A veritable flash of genius. You, my beloved, shall have the honor of being the first Earth dweller ever to make contact with another planet. How do you like that?"

"I'm thrilled." Kitty meant to say it ironically, sensing the Machiavellian design behind the gesture. If she were the one to make that contact, he figured, she could not resist his telling the world about it. She'd spike that. In the meantime—

"What do I do?"

"Sit down here."

She complied.

"Now put your hand on this." He guided her fingers to a heavy telegraph key. "When you press it, you'll start a VHF—very high frequency—pulse across space, beamed for Venus. We'll see the pip when it returns but the exact time will be recorded by that chronograph." This was a black box in whose side a stopwatch was embedded. "Ready?"

"Ready."

"Watch the scope. Now!" As Johnny pressed her fingers down on the key she heard a shrill peep and saw a bit of the scope's green line jump angularly almost to its rim. Then the line was straight again.

"Is that all?"

"That's all till we see the second pip. How about a kiss in the meantime?"

"You don't deserve one." But she turned her face up for it. His lips were cold. "You really are worked up over this, aren't you?"

"A little," he admitted. "Look, Kitty. I haven't a class till eleven tomorrow. What say you meet me at City Hall at nine and we'll get a license?"

"Uh-uh. You know I won't marry you till your appointment is made permanent."

"Oh, honey, that's not fair!" Johnny's fingers rumbled his already tousled hair. "It would be permanent by now if the Army hadn't pulled me out to work on that atomic fission thing."

"And if you hadn't kicked over the apple cart last year, which cancels that out." Kitty wanted very much to give in to him but she knew she must not. She explained why, all over again—broke off.

"There it is!" she exclaimed. "There's the pip."

"Huh!" Startled, he glanced at the stopwatch. "No. Only a little more than a minute and a half. The signal hasn't even reached Venus yet."

"But I saw the line jump, Johnny. I'm sure I did."

"You couldn't have." He snapped open the chronograph's lid, peered in at the tape moving slowly under an inked point. "By Jove, you did see something. There was a pip at eighty-four point seventy-nine seconds. That would mean the radar pulse was reflected from something at—Let me see. . ." He snatched up a slide rule, deftly manipulated the sliding scale. "It would mean the pulse hit something seven million, eight

hundred thousand miles out toward the Sun. But there just isn't anything at that distance."

Kitty was sorry for him, he looked so crestfallen, but she was glad his experiment had mis-fired. This would take him down a badly-needed peg.

"So you were wrong. Venus' atmosphere does make a difference."

"Nonsense. The clouds would damp out or slow the echo if they had any effect at all. I told you that the pulse didn't reach—I've got it!" Johnny was grinning again. "That pip wasn't made by the echoed pulse, it was static on the same frequency. We'll wait out the calculated time and there will be another. The real one."

But there wasn't.

"Okay," Johnny muttered, his face a mask. "We'll try it again. Get up and let me at that key."

THEY didn't talk this time. Johnny watched the scope, his fingers drumming on the edge of the control desk, and Kitty watched him. The echo returned—in exactly eighty-four and seventy-nine hundredths seconds, the same as before.

"That does it." An astronomer might have questioned the radar's evidence but Johnny Rober had complete faith in his instrument. "Something's gotten in between Earth and Venus. I'll have to try again tomorrow."

Kitty said nothing, not even when he explained that they couldn't spend the day together as they'd planned. If Professor Gardlane still was to be kept in ignorance of his experiment, Johnny would have to be in the lab before the first Monday morning class arrived. He'd have to recalculate all his settings for Venus' new position in the dawn sky and even working through the night he'd be lucky if he finished in time.

No, Kitty didn't say anything, not even goodbye. She just turned and walked out of the building and it wasn't until she was out of Johnny's sight and hearing that she let the tears come.

The first students were not due in the lab until nine the next day but Johnny was at the radar at six. He made the necessary adjustments, pressed the key. The echo returned precisely two and four-hundredths seconds more quickly than it had on Sunday.

The interfering object was still there in space, where nothing should be, but it was

a hundred and ninety-one thousand miles nearer than it had been nineteen hours ago. Whatever it was, it was speeding towards Earth at the rate of more than ten thousand miles an hour.

Johnny was not alarmed. Not yet. Overnight he had realized that the space-wanderer probably was a meteor. Even if it were fairly large as meteors go and even if it should reach the Earth, air friction would burn it up before it could strike the surface. It was hardly more than curiosity that prompted him to switch in the Plan Position Indicator, that ingenious device which paints on a screen a luminous representation of any object its radar beam scans.

The PPI he used was far more efficient than those that during the war enabled observers on the British coast to spot enemy planes over Germany's borders and direct Allied night fighters to them. Nevertheless Johnny expected to see on its screen no more than a microscopic fleck, if anything at all. What he saw was a spot of light almost as large as the ball of his thumb.

His skin tightened but his hands were steady as he measured the spot. When he'd finished his intricate computations, his lips puckered to a long, low whistle. The mass that hurtled across the void towards our planet was too huge to burn up in its atmosphere. If it struck, disaster would ensue.

Deep within Johnny Rober there jittered the beginnings of panic.

Then he grinned sheepishly, ashamed that he for an instant had forgotten his logic. All he knew was that the object existed and that it was traveling through space. To calculate whether there was any danger of collision it was necessary to determine its path with relation to Earth's orbit and its relative speed. This he could not do until, twenty-four hours from now, he made a third reading.

He managed that day to keep his mind on his teaching well enough to get by, but he completely forgot his intention to phone Kitty at noon and make his peace with her.

As soon as he was free, he immersed himself in the new set of calculations now necessary. For Kitty's part, she waited near the phone all Monday, cried herself to sleep that night. When at seven-thirty Tuesday morning her father called up to her that Johnny was on the phone her anger flared up.

"Tell him I don't want to speak to him

now or ever again," she called back.

"If you want him told that, you can do it yourself."

"I certainly will." By chance she'd scrambled out of bed and was out in the upstairs hall, barefooted and in her pajamas. She snatched off the receiver of the extension there.

"You look here, Johnny Rober. If you think I'm going to stand for—"

"I want to talk to you, honey," he broke in. "Meet me at Hare's Campus Lunchroom in ten minutes."

"I won't meet you anywhere. And besides I'm not dressed."

"Fifteen minutes then."

She was at Hare's in thirteen. The room was crowded with breakfasting students but Johnny had taken possession of a booth in the rear and had held it against all comers. He was haggard, his eyes underlined with sooty crescents. The hot words Kitty'd planned died on her lips.

"What's wrong, Johnny? What's happened?"

His reply was cryptic. "Nothing yet. Maybe nothing will. Sit down here alongside me and I'll tell you about it as soon as Bill brings our orders."

WHAT Bill put on their table was two portions each of orange juice, griddle cakes, country sausage, doughnuts and coffee. By the time he'd ambled off, Kitty had pulled herself together.

"All right, now give," she demanded. "How bad a jam are you in this time?"

"None. At least I won't be if you release me from my promise not to say anything about my try for Venus."

"Oh, no. Nothing doing."

"Wait. Let me explain." He drained his orange juice, spilled half a pitcher of syrup on his wheat cakes and went to work on them while he told her about yesterday's discovery.

"This morning," he continued, "I had a little trouble locating the thing again but I did find it after some pretty delicate scanning. It's still speeding along at ten thousand miles an hour and—get this, Kitty—if it sticks to the curve I've now been able to plot, approximately thirty-one days from now it will arrive at the same spot in space where we're due to be."

"I see what you mean." Kitty sensed he

was not taking it as lightly as his tone and manner implied. "Are you sure, Johnny?"

"I'm sure of my observations and calculations. What's got me winging is what Bob Hasseltine told me just before I phoned you. I remembered he was on night shift at the Observatory so I called him there and asked him if there was anything in that particular region of space that might explain some unusual electrical phenomena I'd noted. No, he said. Because of Venus' closeness to Earth most astronomers are concentrating on that section of the sky and nothing out of the ordinary has been reported. You know, don't you, that those star-gazers flash each other all over the world the instant anything unexpected appears. If Bob says nothing has been seen, it means that no one, anywhere, has seen anything."

"But it's so small and so far away. Could they see it?"

"It's one hundred and fifty miles in diameter. Even in the early part of this century Percival Lowell saw on Mars markings he called canals. They were only about twenty miles wide, and modern telescopes are far more efficient than those of his day."

Kitty's fork scraped her empty plate. She'd disposed of her sausages without consciously tasting them.

"Look, Johnny. If there was something there, the astronomers would have seen it. They haven't seen anything. So there's nothing there and what are you all in a tizzy about?"

"My radar tells me something is there," Johnny said doggedly. "The astronomers are all wet."

"And you want me to let you tell them so. I see." Kitty put down her coffee cup very carefully. Her voice was low, even, but two white spots had appeared beside either wing of her nose and her eyes were black fire. "All right. I release you from your promise. For all I care, you can go up to the top of Carillon Tower and proclaim to the high heavens that John Rober, probationary instructor in physics, knows more about science than all the world's astronomers. You can dress yourself in a white robe and announce the end of the world in thirty days. But just remember that the instant you let out your first peep about this, I'm through with you, absolutely and forever."

She meant it. Johnny knew that this time she meant it and that neither argument nor

all his cute tricks would sway her.

We cannot, of course, know what passed through his mind as he stared expressionlessly at the cluttered table but it must have run something like this: To say publicly what he'd just told Kitty not only would be pitting his opinion against scientific authority in a sphere to which he was a stranger but, as she had pungently pointed out, would smack strongly of charlatanism. He had once been discredited in his own field, he could not expect the support of other physicists. If against these odds, he somehow gained a hearing and were proven wrong, his career would be ruined irretrievably and he would have lost the girl he profoundly loved.

Suppose he proved himself right. What, other than the inflation of his ego, would he have gained? The collision he anticipated could not be averted nor could any conceivable precautions be taken against it. Was it, after all, so greatly to be dreaded? The chances were that the meteor would plunge harmlessly into an ocean or strike some unpopulated spot. At the very worst, it could only destroy one city with a cost in lives and property still paltry against that of a single, avoidable World War.

He lifted his head and turned to Kitty.

"Okay, honey," he said. "We'll skip it."

The few students who'd not hurried out to eight o'clock classes chortled as they saw the black-haired girl throw her arms around the man in the booth and kiss him.

"I'm so glad, Johnny."

"I'm glad you're glad, baby. I'm sort of relieved myself."

Which was true only in part. Marring Johnny's relief at his decision was a vague feeling that despite its logic there was something wrong with it, some element of the problem that he had missed. This feeling grew until it became almost an obsession. It sent him to the radar morning after morning to dispatch another microwave pulse out into the ether. It drove him to the University's Observatory every afternoon to pore over the daily summary of reports from the world's telescopes.

DAY by day his radar told him that the mysterious mass still hurtled along the same ominous path, closer each day by nearly a quarter-million miles to its meeting with Earth. Never did the astronomers report any hint of the interloper.

Curiously enough, the first intimation from anyone else that all was not as it should be in the interstellar void appeared in the literature of Johnny's own field, physics. A small item in the bulletin of a famous Eastern University's laboratory, it noted a puzzling increase in the number of gamma rays impinging on our atmosphere. The phenomenon was being investigated and other physical laboratories were requested to cooperate.

Johnny asked that he be assigned Midwest's part of the project. He had no real interest in it but the apparatus was housed in the Electronics Building and so it would give him an excuse for his early morning visits there. He turned the actual work over to three graduate students, assuming merely general supervision. Not even when detailed reports from around the globe made it evident that the phenomenon occurred only during daylight hours did he suspect any connection with the problem by which he was hag-ridden.

Thus matters stood on the second Monday after Johnny Rober's first attempt to make contact with Venus by radar. That evening he received a bulky special delivery communication from the institution which had initiated the gamma ray study. A worker there had been inspired to check medical records and had made a startling discovery.

All over the world there was manifest an increase of degenerative diseases, more marked in the northern regions where the day was lengthening with summer's approach. In Norway, Land of the Midnight Sun, the maladies already had reached epidemic proportions and here the symptoms closely resembled those by which immediate survivors of the atomic bomb explosions over Japan later had died slowly and horribly.

Gamma rays are one of the products of atomic fission and had been found mainly responsible for those deaths. Was there any relation, the memorandum posed as a question for further study, between the present rise in their atmospheric concentration and the medical phenomena noted?

Enclosed with the message were curves, plotted against time, of the increase in gamma ray concentration at Oslo and the incidence there of the obscure maladies. Pondering the graphs, Johnny's mind leaped to one of those sudden revelations that mark the born researcher. If he inverted a curve representing the diminishing distance be-

tween Earth and the sky-wanderer of which only he was aware, it would match these two graphs almost exactly. The invisible meteor was the source of the rays that from across millions of miles of space already were blasting human life. When it came nearer, when it finally kept its grim rendezvous with our planet, all life on Earth would end.

And he knew now the nature of the thing he had been tracking across the sky. That night he wrote in the notebook in which he kept a meticulous record of his experiments and the speculations involved:

It is a swirl of radioactive gases transparent to light (therefore invisible in the astronomers' telescopes) but somehow capable of reflecting the microwaves upon which radar depends. I should like to examine the reason for this but that would require more than the twenty-four days or so that are all the time left to any of us.

The gases may have been spewed out by the Sun or by some star beyond our Sun. More likely, I think, they were whirled out into space by one of the atomic bombs we exploded above Japan. We know that the main force of these explosions was expended upwards. They may have fed upon the pure energy of the interstellar void and now somehow have been turned back to destroy us who created them. This would be the ultimate irony.

It occurs to me that whatever the materialistic explanation, the fundamental one well may be that God, finally disgusted with the human race, has decided to wipe it out and start all over again.

To publish his results now would not be challenging the scientific hierarchy but simply offering one more piece of data fitting in with and completing a structure already established. Kitty now was certain to release him from his promise if he explained.

If he explained, he would tell her that she had only a little more than three weeks to live. To publish his results would be to tell the people of the world that inevitably, helplessly, they were doomed to die before another month had passed.

"Perhaps I am wrong," Johnny Rober wrote, "but I see no point in pronouncing this sentence of death to all my kind. If there was any possibility of avoiding it—and there is none—I shall keep silent."

One would expect that, in the days that followed, the burden of his dreadful secret would have brought him near to madness. Nothing could be further from the event. He'd never lectured as brilliantly, never had been as penetrating as in that time. The youngsters in his courses came from his room

walking on clouds, their faces aglow as though they'd been listening to great music.

DURING his afternoons and evenings with Kitty—he spent all possible free time with her—he'd never been as exuberant, as gay or as tender. He made her very happy. So happy that she paid no attention to the newspaper items, small at first and on the back pages then lengthening, working their way toward the front, that told of a strange new malady decimating the Scandinavian Peninsula, the northern reaches of Russia and Siberia, and Alaska.

But there are more ways than one to skin a cat. A physicist in the University of Moscow got the notion of determining by photochemical means the direction from which the gamma rays were arriving in our stratosphere. His results were so significant that he requested colleagues in Oslo University, Edinburgh, McGill, to check them. Somewhere, someone talked out of turn.

A reporter for one of the world-wide news services started digging. Some scientists are anxious for the limelight, others more circumspect are naive. And so Johnny Rober, calling for Kitty early the morning of the Sunday two weeks after that on which this narrative began, found her dressed for their all-day picnic but staring white-faced at the front page of the newspapers she'd just picked up from her porch.

In huge black type a headline screamed across it:

SCIENTISTS FIND DEATH RAY SOURCE IN SKY

Invisible Comet Nearing Earth

Predict All Life Extinct in Two Weeks

"No-o-o," she moaned. "It's a hoax, Johnny. It's cruel!" She checked herself. "Johnny! Your meteor. The one your radar found. This is it."

He nodded mutely. The bubble-shell of protection he'd blown around her was pricked. What was there for him to say?

"It's my fault." Kitty's pupils were great black pits within which horror crawled. "If I'd let you talk, something could have been done to stop this."

"No, darling," Johnny said gently. "Nothing could have been done to stop it. Nothing at all."

The paper dropped from her hand.

"Two weeks," she whispered. And suddenly she was smiling. "Let's get married, Johnny. Right away."

"It's Sunday, dear. We can't get a license until tomorrow morning. We'll have to wait."

"Must we?" Twenty-four hours out of a lifetime which has only two weeks to run is a terribly long time. "Must we wait, Johnny?"

"Yes." Had he been able to look twenty-four hours into the future, would he have replied so? "Yes, my very dear, we must wait."

In a thousand languages and dialects that same terrible announcement blackened newspaper fronts all across the world. In as many tongues it filled the broadcast channels. By mid-morning—four p.m. in London, two o'clock Monday morning in Melbourne—it had been carried by word of mouth to the headwaters of the Amazon, by booming drums to the remotest jungles of Africa. The furred nomads of the Arctic wastes had heard it and the Touregs of the Sahara knew now how low had run the sands in the hour-glass of human life.

At eleven, denials of the "rumor" met with disbelief everywhere. At noon there were "explanations" that did not explain. At four in the afternoon scientists whose names were household words were admitting the "basic facts" but were assuring that "there is no cause for alarm. We have already devised methods by which the threatened disaster will be averted. Further announcements will be made as soon as our plans have crystallized." And on a hill near Los Angeles a bearded man in a white robe preached the Day of Judgment while his fifty thousand dupes roared welcome to the Messiah.

In a Paris garret, Aristide Jouin worked furiously to complete his masterpiece of painting. In a hut high on a Bavarian Alp, Martin Bohrs—only intimate of Hitler to escape capture—cut his own throat. Big Ben tolled over BBC's microphones and then the Prime Minister was speaking:

"We shall weather this trial as we have weathered all others. Even though the heavens themselves fall, there will always be an England."

The President of the United States issued an order that the Stock Exchange remain closed Monday. Advices had reached him that a tidal wave of short-selling was in prospect.

At one a.m. Johnny Rober was in his room, listening with half an ear to the radio while he packed his few belongings.

"We take you now to Verndon, Vermont," he heard, "for an interview with Professor Giles Foster, Director of the Cunningham Institute for Physical Research."

"So Giles Foster is shooting off his mouth too," Johnny muttered. "I thought more of him than that."

He went to the bathroom to collect his shaving kit. On his way back he wondered if there would be plenty of hot water in Kitty's house. When he opened the door, Foster's somewhat unctuous voice greeted him. "The only way to confirm or disprove all this wild speculation is to make our observations out in space, beyond the interference of terrestrial conditions."

"In a space ship, professor?" the interviewer asked. "Even if that were feasible, could one be built in time?"

"The Institute has very nearly completed one. Oh, not a space-ship that could transport passengers but an instrument-carrying rocket we're sure can attain the acceleration of seven miles a second per second that will free it from Earth's gravitational attraction."

THE radio station interviewer still seemed doubtful about several points.

"Will not atmospheric friction at that speed burn up your rocket before it gets out of the atmosphere?"

"No. We've solved that problem." Johnny was motionless in the center of the room, the shaving kit still clutched in his hand. "We've synthesized a new substance. Refractite, which can withstand higher temperatures than any natural material known and is so non-conductive of heat that the delicate instruments within the rocket will not be affected. Incidentally, Refractite presented us with an unexpected problem to solve when it proved to be well-nigh impervious to radio-active emanations, including the gamma rays."

"What's that?" the network man barked. "Impervious to—Good heavens! Don't you realize what you've got? It's the stuff that will save the race. This is terrific!"

And then the savant's imperturbable voice chilled the blaze of excitement that had caused the radio man to forget his impersonal role.

"I'm sorry if I've misled you. Only enough

of the substance exists to construct this one rocket. It would take six months to turn out any more, a year to put it into mass production."

"But—"

"Please permit me to continue." Foster might be chiding a too-voluble student. "I was trying to say that because this unexpected property of Refractite would have shuttered the gamma rays from the instrument designed to record them, we were compelled to devise a detachable false nose of the synthetic to house the recorder in a separate compartment, and a means for discarding this shell when the rocket has passed out of the atmosphere. I mention this merely as a single example of the difficulties with which we have had to contend."

The interview continued. It had originally been planned to steer the rocket by remote radio control but, Foster explained, the necessary apparatus could not be completed in time for the launching, which would be at dawn on Tuesday. The instruments composing its cargo would send their data back to Earth by means of automatic microwave transmitters similar to those used by meteorologists in their sounding balloons but the rocket itself would be lost. Yes, in response to a question, yes it was quite large. It had to be to carry the fuel that was required in addition to all the apparatus. The compartment containing the apparatus would comfortably accommodate a man if it were not otherwise filled.

"Thank you, professor," the broadcaster ended the talk. "Ladies and gentlemen. You have been listening to an interview with Professor Giles Foster of the Cunningham Institute for Physical Research. I return you now to New York, where Ben Grauer is waiting to tell you more of what is going on in the metropolis."

The radio rasped and then another voice was speaking. A mob looted Broadway's liquor stores and Times Square was a scene of Saturnalia. Two blocks away, on Fifth Avenue, St. Patrick's Cathedral and the St. Nicholas Collegiate Church were packed to the doors with praying multitudes, as was Temple Emanu-El farther north. Marty Tanville, much-married heir to an unearned fortune, had appeared at the Children's Society Shelter with a truckload of toys and another of candy and ice cream, and had given these things away.

It is doubtful that Johnny Rober heard any of this, or the later reports, of the howling horde of Untouchables that hunted high-caste Brahmins through the twisted alleys of Calcutta, of the twenty virgins sacrificed in the depths of Yucatan to the Feathered Serpent, god of the ancient Mayans.

At seven Monday morning Kitty looked up the street to see if Johnny was yet in sight. There was no sign of him, but on the porch lay a paper-wrapped package and atop it a letter addressed to her in his handwriting. She tore open the envelope, unfolded the sheet of paper it contained. She read:

Dearest—My keeping silent about what the radar told me did make a difference. It cost two weeks of valuable time. I'm going to try and make that up.

The package contains my notebook. Keep it for me, unopened, until noon on Tuesday. After that, take it to Gardey.

If my idea doesn't work out, we'll be together again very soon. If it does, always remember that I loved you more deeply than language can tell. Goodby, darling.

Johnny Rober appeared in Washington later that morning. Here a certain Army General consented to talk to him privately because he recalled Johnny as one of the more brilliant of the young scientists who'd worked under him on the development of the atomic bomb. About noon, Johnny and the General left Bolling Field in the General's personal plane, for some destination unknown. One of the men assisting at the take-off overheard the officer's comment.

"I'll be court-martialed for this but I certainly can take that if you can take what you're facing," the General said.

With this, John Rober vanishes from the face of the Earth.

IT IS comprehensible that the General, a layman who had supervised the working of a scientific miracle and was now the custodian of its secrets, should have been carried away by the starkly simple daring of Johnny's plan. Giles Foster's part in it is still obscure. Was he also in on the thing, or was he merely too much the unwordly pundit to realize that after his broadcast he should have placed guards about the rocket? Probably the latter. From all reports he was thunderstruck when, some two hours after its dispatch, all the instruments that were to have formed its cargo were found hidden in a nearby thicket.

By that time the rocket was some sixty-

seven thousand miles out in space and within it, in the compartment he'd emptied of its instruments, was Johnny Rober. In his notebook he had written as follows:

There is only one way to be certain that it arrives at the right point at the right time. I shall have to guide it there. Since it was originally designed to be steered by remote control, there must be some means of maneuvering it. I shall take along food concentrates, water, and three or four oxygen flasks such as bombers carried for emergencies during the war. These should keep me alive and conscious long enough to do what I plan. The only question is whether, after the flight through the stratosphere, there will be sufficient fuel left for what navigation will be required.

It did not enter in his calculations, you see, whether consciousness or fuel would last long enough to bring him back to Earth.

I must be certain to locate and disconnect the automatic control designed to cast off the false nose Foster mentioned. This is the most fortunate part of the whole affair. Had it not been for this feature of the rocket's construction, I should have had no way to unloose the atomic bomb.

There was the crux of his plan. He would carry an atomic bomb out across space to the death-bearing meteor. When the bomb exploded, its tremendous blast of energy would dissipate or at least divert the whirlpool of gases that by now was a scant four and a half million miles from its grim rendezvous with the Earth.

It would be nearer before Johnny could intercept it.

"As nearly as I can calculate, I'll know the answer some time Saturday afternoon," he wrote in the diary.

On Saturday Johnny knew he would lock himself into the rocket Tuesday, before dawn. He would have nearly five days to go. Five days not only of darkness and discomfort but of such loneliness as no man yet has been called on to contemplate. Even a prisoner in solitary confinement knows that somewhere near him are other human beings. Even a shipwrecked sailor on a raft in mid-Pacific knows that somewhere on the same sea are ships and, within the ships, men. During those five days Johnny Rober would be keenly aware that second by second, minute by minute, eight miles every second, four hundred and eighty every minute, he was leaving behind him forever the world of his own kind.

Monday morning Johnny wrote a last poignant line in his notebook.

"Today was to have been my wedding day."

"A hero is speeding to blast the meteor menace from the sky," was the announcement that went out on the radio at eleven minutes after noon on Tuesday—six p.m. in London, 4 a.m. Wednesday in Melbourne. Good news, it is said, does not spread as swiftly as bad, but in this case the old saying proved to be wrong. As quickly as the shadow of an eclipse passes from the globe, so quickly did the terror pass. Before the result could possibly have been known, desperate hope became reality in the minds of man.

Five days went by.

At three-fifty-seven p.m. watchers in Midwest University's Observatory saw a new star flash out in the daylight sky, bright even against the brightness of the sun. The nova faded at once but the location plotted for it corresponded precisely to the point in space which Johnny Rober's figures predicted would be occupied by the gaseous meteor at that instant in time. By four-thirty reports already were coming in to the Director of the Electronics Laboratory that the gamma ray concentration in Earth's atmosphere was dwindling.

* * * * *

When I took the first of these reports to Kitty, she smiled for the first time in six days, a wan and heartrending smile.

"Aren't you proud of Johnny?" I asked her, offering such clumsy consolation as a father might give. "Aren't you proud to have known and been loved by him?"

"To be loved by him," she flared back at

me with a bit of her old fiery spirit. "He's alive, Gardey. He's alive and he'll come back to us. You know what he wrote."

She referred to the letter he'd written to me and enclosed with his notebook. After some personal remarks which I hardly deserve, there was this:

After I've loosed the bomb, I shall try to reverse the rocket. I doubt whether I shall have enough fuel left to do more than cancel its outward momentum but if I can do that Earth's gravity should bring me back in free fall. After that—well, the surface of the globe is three parts water to one part land.

I'm sure that among Foster's radio set-ups there will be one that can be fixed to emit a continuous signal. If there is, and if—if all the thousand "ifs" sum up to my getting back to Earth alive, I shall try to get it going. Be listening.

"Yes," I answered my black-eyed daughter. "I haven't forgotten what he wrote. The Navy Department has arranged to have all the oceans patrolled either by our planes or those of all the other grateful nations. All we can do now is wait."

That is what we are doing now. Waiting. I've written this narrative while I waited and I hope I have succeeded in writing it as objectively as I set out to do. It is six days and five hours now since that nova flared out and faded. I've given up hope. Kitty has not.

I've just received the following telegram from the General who thought court-martial after a lifetime of honored service a small risk against what Johnny faced:

PROFESSOR CHARLES DARWIN GARDLANE, MIDWEST UNIVERSITY.

SEARCH PLANE OVER PACIFIC HAS HEARD WEAK VHF RADIO SIGNAL STOP CAN BE ONLY ROBER STOP INSIST ON INVITATION TO WEDDING.

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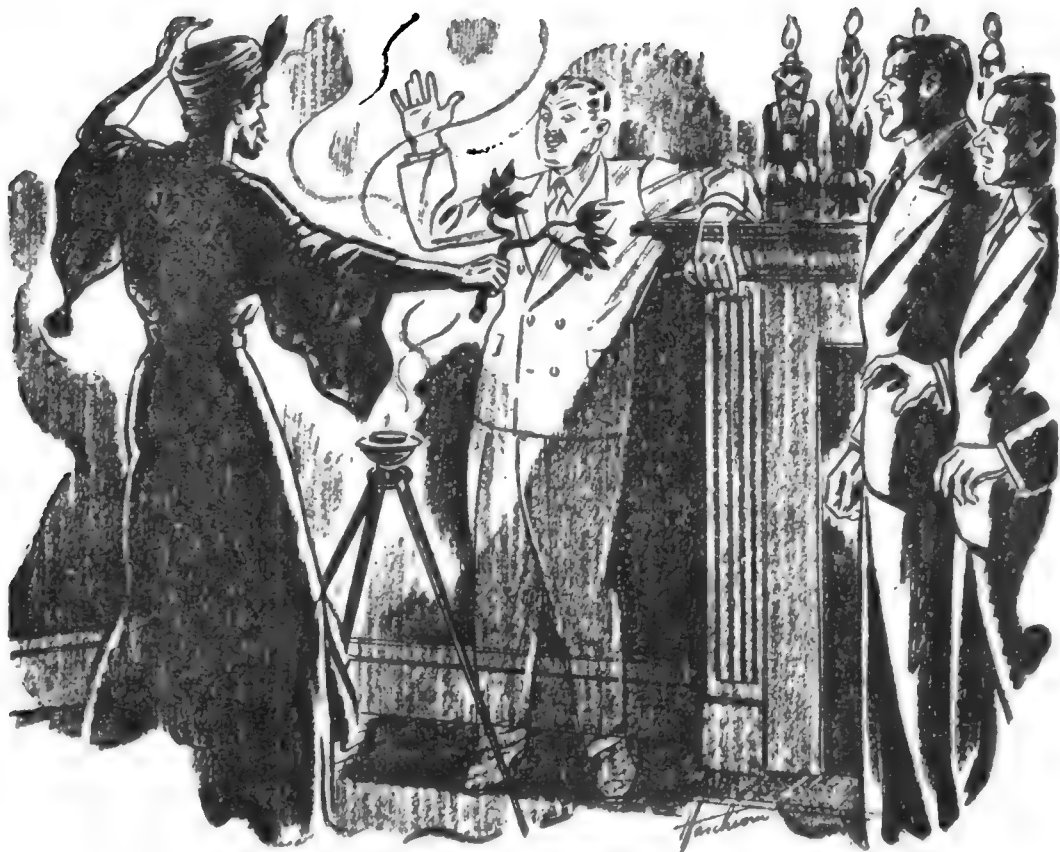
2 Only a little Wildroot Cream-Oil can do a big job for your hair. Keeps your hair well groomed all day long without a trace of that greasy, plastered down look! Your hair looks good and feels good too!

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3 Get Wildroot Cream-Oil from your barber or drug counter. AND TUNE IN... "The Adventures of Sam Spade" on CBS Network every Sunday.





One apparition after another was banished

The Ghosts of Melvin Pye

By L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP

Landlord George Conroy finds things too spooky for him when his property is besieged by frolicsome "ha'nts"

THERE it was again.

Bernard Rigoulot heaved himself up on one elbow, staring into the darkness.

He told himself, Don't be a fool, Barney. It's your imagination. There ain't no such things—it's your imagination. You're getting old—ought to go to a doctor. If you can't afford a doctor, a clinic then!

The argument between two persons murmured and twittered along the floor and up the wall.

Rigoulot thought, If they're going to keep

me awake, they might talk so as I can hear them.

The argument waxed suddenly, like a radio turned up.

"You scoundrel, he's awake," said one voice.

"I know, buddy," said the second voice.

"You'll scare him!"

"That's what I wanna do."

"It's ag'in the rules." Here came a vulgar noise made with the mouth. Then an apparition appeared.

It was the wraith of a stout, dark man of

forty, with a small mustache, and dressed in a neatly pressed, double-breasted dark suit. It leaned over the foot of the bed, extended a plump forefinger, and said:

"Boo!"

Rigoulot poked his wife. "Hey, honey! Wake up!"

Bertha awoke. "What is it?"

"Looky there! Do you see what I see?"

"Looks like a ghost," she said.

"I am a ghost!" the wraith said. "Heh-heh-heh!"

"Eeeeeek!" said Mrs. Rigoulot, and pulled the covers over her head.

"Heh-heh," continued the ghost. "That's showing 'em, Phony, old boy?"

"Will you stop?" said a voice—either the same voice or another identical with it. At that point, Rigoulot, too, pulled the covers over his head.

* * * * *

The Conroy Realty Company—in private life George Conroy—looked up from its desk with a forced smile, knowing that tenants called only about complaints. This was in normal times, when landlords competed for tenants, instead of the other way round.

"Hello, Mr. Conroy," said Bernard Rigoulot.

"Hello, Mr.—uh—Rigoulot," said Conroy. "I'll have a man over to fix that burner in a couple of days."

Rigoulot ignored that remark.

"I aim to break my lease," he said.

"You can't do that! A lease is a contract. I'll have that oil-burner fixed!"

"Tain't that. It's ha'nts."

"Ants? I'll get the exterminator."

"Ha'nts, not ants. Ghosts—things that go woouoo."

"You're crazy, man."

RIGOULOT shook his head.

"I seen what I seen, and so did my wife," he said. "Yesterday my hands was shaking so I couldn't draw. So I'm leaving, unless you can get rid of the ha'nts."

"Now Mr. Rigoulot, what's the real reason you want to leave?"

"I told you. Ha'nts."

Conroy sighed.

"Look. Will you stay on if I spend a night in your house and see the ghost?"

"Mebbe. If you can get rid of the ghost, I'll see."

When Rigoulot had left, Conroy spoke to his secretary.

"Mrs. Small, get out the file on that block of houses on One Hundred Seventy-Fifth Place." Then he answered the telephone.

"Yes, Mrs. Barth, I'll send a man over right away. In a couple of days. Well, next Friday at the latest."

"Better do something about that stove, Mr. Conroy," said the secretary. "The Barths are two months behind on their rent and say they won't pay until it's fixed."

"Did you send them the usual notices?"

"Yes, but they didn't weaken."

Conroy sighed.

"Guess we'll have to fix their blasted stove. Find out how much it'll be."

Mrs. Small got out the file on Rigoulot's house, and Conroy studied it.

"Unh," he said. "That's where that guy Pye was killed. That was before we took over the block. Hm."

"Scared?" said Mrs. Small.

Before Conroy could frame a biting reply, the telephone rang again.

"It's Miss Winston," Mrs. Small said.

The Conroy Realty Company disappeared and George Conroy, the Man, took its place. He spoke into the instrument in monosyllables, half of them being "Unh."

"Okay, Babs, six," he ended. "By-by."

"Why don't you marry her, boss?" said Mrs. Small. "You owe it to her after monopolizing her time for ten years. Or are you afraid of dividing up your income?"

Conroy glared.

"I don't pry into your affairs, Mrs. Small!" he growled, and buried himself in the file on Rigoulot's house.

* * * * *

Conroy arrived at the Rigoulot house at 9 P.M. and drank the glass of beer that Rigoulot offered him. Mrs. Rigoulot excused herself and went to bed. Conroy did not miss her, for her conversation was confined to platitudes.

"You're one of my prize tenants, you know," he told Rigoulot. "Always on time with the rent. I'd hate to lose you."

"I was just brought up that way," said Rigoulot. "I don't accep' favors. But see here: I cain't live in a ha'nted house. If I get so shaky I cain't draw, you won't have no rent or tenant or nothing." He looked at the clock. "'Leven fifty. Guess it's time to turn the lights out."

The time they sat in the darkness seemed longer than it actually was. Then a faint mutter trickled along the wainscoting. It

drifted this way and that, growing louder. Conroy felt that his blood had left his viscera to concentrate in his scalp.

"Ga wan, scram!"

"How dare you!"

"To blazes with the rules. I'm feeling good. *Whoop!*"

The apparition popped into view.

Conroy was as brave as most, and there was nothing too alarming about a plump, middle-aged ghost in a double-breasted suit. But Conroy had his share of atavistic fears. He rose, tensing his muscles to keep his knees from knocking.

"Who are you?" said Conroy.

"Heh-heh," said the ghost. "So *you're* that low-down landlord? Another mama's boy, like Phony. Watch out! Gonna getcha!" The ghost grimaced and extended clutching hands.

Conroy stood it as long as he could. Then something snapped, and he found himself outside and running. Ghostly laughter behind him made him run faster. But he did not go too fast to reflect that this phenomenon was practically certain to cost him money. . . .

The next morning, after some hesitation, Conroy worked up his courage to call the detective agency. He might never have committed himself to the expense but for Mrs. Small's sarcasms.

"Well, shall I do it for you?" she had asked.

The detective turned out to be a burly man named Edward Kalesky, who might have been left over from the Paleolithic.

"Spooks?" he said. "You wouldn't kid me, Mr. Conroy?"

"I never kid," said Conroy.

"I mean, are they real or phony?"

"That's for you to find out. It is a coincidence that a man named Melvin Pye was murdered by a burglar in that house ten years ago. All I know about him is his name, because we didn't own that block of houses then."

KALESKY approached Rigoulot's house without qualms. He was a good detective, having enough imagination to guess what other people might do, but not so much as to let unusual events give him creepy-crawlies. He was a little depressed about working "way out in the sticks," by which he meant in a region where houses had lawns.

No. 10915 175th Place was a small brick house in suburban Georgian, exactly like all

the other houses in the block except for details of coloring. Rigoulot, forewarned, let Kalesky in and made him comfortable.

The apparition, however, failed to appear on schedule. Instead, when midnight arrived, Kalesky's hair was raised by shrieks from next door. He started out, and met the ghost coming in.

"Whee!" said the apparition. "Got lost. All these cussed houses look alike. See, Phony?" The wraith hiccupped.

Kalesky quietly whipped out a blackjack and swung. He was not prepared to have the weapon pass through the apparition without resistance. As a result he swung himself halfway around, turned his ankle on the top step, and fell heavily.

He sat up, feeling his hurts, and groaned. Rigoulot popped into sight at the door.

"Reckon blackjacks ain't no good for ha'nts," he said.

"Ga wan, you cheap little tenant you!" snarled the ghost, making a snatch at Rigoulot, who disappeared up the stairs. The ghost looked down at Kalesky.

"A flatfoot, huh? Nosey gumshoe, coming to spoil my fun! I'll fix you! I'll follow you home, going *woooo!* I'll crawl in bed with you and rattle my teeth. I'll materialize just my head on your mantelpiece and tell your relatives what I think of them. I'll—let go, you! Scram! I don't give a hoot." The ghost seemed to be struggling with something, and gradually faded from sight.

Kalesky picked himself up and limped back to his hotel, muttering.

Next morning Kalesky called Conroy, and told him what had happened. Conroy gave him little sympathy, having troubles of his own. The tenant of 10917, which the ghost had mistakenly invaded, was also threatening to skip.

Kalesky spent the next two days examining Rigoulot's house and grounds. He had once conducted an exposé against mediums, so knew what to look for. But not a sign of a concealed loud-speaker or projector did he find. He also looked up Rigoulot. But the little tenant had a prosaic enough background. Born in South Carolina, he had worked as a draftsman in the city for twenty years.

By now Kalesky had an open mind on the subject of the ghost of the late Melvin Pye. He got the date of the man's murder from Mrs. Small. The newspapers of that week in the public library gave some details about

Pye, and the Police Department furnished Kalesky with some more information. The killing had not been solved, but was apparently the work of a burglar who had been surprised. Pye at that time was the treasurer of a small cafeteria chain.

Kalesky looked up the chain's offices. Most of the personnel had changed since Pye's time, but the present head of the chain had been a vice-president when Pye had worked there, and remembered him.

"Yeah, he was smart as a whip," the president explained. "But I don't think he'd have gotten much further. He had a funny personality—sort of cringing. And he was so good it hurt. He didn't smoke, drink, swear, or anything. He was a good treasurer, though—careful and conscientious."

This picture of Pye did not convey an idea much like the ghost, unless the Pye character had deteriorated vastly since death. Kalesky reported to Conroy on his work.

"That's all very well," said Conroy testily. "But it doesn't get rid of the spook. Number Ten-Nine-Fifteen is vacant now."

"That little Southern guy leave?"

"Yes. He lost his job, he said, because he was too nervous to draw. Blamed me for it. He said he was moving in on some kin-folk."

"Whatcha going to do with the house?"

"I'm moving into it myself. I've been living in one of the apartments in my apartment house, but I'd have a better chance of renting the apartment than a haunted house."

"You got nerve."

"Matter of dollars, Kalesky. But what are you going to do?"

THOUGHTFULLY Kalesky rubbed his jawl.

"I dunno yet. How about my moving in with you? It would cut the expense account."

The first evening, a handsome woman still young enough to be called a girl, rang the doorbell. When Kalesky opened it, she jumped back with a little shriek.

"Wazzamatta?" said Kalesky.

"Oh, I thought you were the ghost." She identified herself as Conroy's Miss Winston, who had come over to cook dinner for them.

Kalesky returned to his cigar and sporting page. In the kitchen he overheard Miss Winston talking.

"But George," she said, "what was I to think when the door opened and a hairy

gorilla confronted me." Kalesky, who fortunately was not vain, grinned.

Miss Winston stayed to see the ghost-hunt. There was not much to see. When midnight approached, Kalesky got out a camera with a photoflash attachment, and put out the lights.

The argument began as usual. When the apparition popped into sight, faintly luminescent, Kalesky snapped the camera.

"Oh-oh!" said the ghost. "Getting my picture took. The real, original, authentic ghost of Melvin Pye. Beware of imitations. Hope you're having fun, flatfoot." By the time the watchers' eyes had recovered from the flash, the apparition had vanished, and the argument with the invisible interlocutor had subsided to a mumble.

Kalesky developed and printed the picture himself. It showed the living room, and in the living room the wraith, with the bookcase showing clearly through him.

"Okay," snapped Conroy. "You've proved that this house is haunted by the ghost of Melvin Pye. I knew that already. I want to get rid of the danged thing."

"I'm just a detective, not an ex—what are those guys that cast out devils?" said Kalesky.

"Exorcists?"

"Yeah. I'm not an exorcist. What do you expect me to do, say 'Boo!' to—say!"

When the ghost showed up that night, the closet door swung open, and a sheeted figure marched out. It stretched a bare arm toward the apparition.

"Ooooooh!" it groaned.

"Yeow!" yelled the ghost. "I got 'em!" And he vanished.

But he instantly reappeared in another part of the room; or at least the new arrival looked like the other. "I must apologize, my dear sirs, for my double's abominable behavior," the second apparition said. "I shall take steps at the next guild meeting to have him cited for unbecoming conduct."

"Huh?" said Kalesky and Conroy together.

"I see you don't understand. I'm really the ghost of Melvin Pye. The other creature is a bogus imitation. You frightened him away so suddenly that his ectoplasm was transferred to me. Oh, dear, I do hope he doesn't go haunt the distillery again!" With which the second ghost faded out of sight.

"Hey, come back!" Kalesky called. But to no avail.

"Now what?" the detective asked Conroy.

Conroy groaned.

"We seem to have two ghosts. But the main thing still is to get rid of them. We could hire an exorcist, couldn't we?"

"I suppose so. It'd cost you more dough."

"I can stand that, I guess."

Kalesky looked up a Swami Mahananda whom he had known in his medium-busting days. The swami was a thin, dark man dressed entirely in black except for his white shirt. He was one of the few practitioners of his profession on whom Kalesky had never been able to get anything. This was why Kalesky turned to him now.

"You say," said Swami Mahananda in his high, accented voice, "that you have two ghosts, bot' of them claiming to be the ghost of the late Melvin Pye?"

"Uh-huh."

"That is a very pecooliar case. I have h'ard of one other like it—the *dvirupa* mentioned in the forty-second *tantra* of Kama-krishna. I will take your case, not so much for the fee—which you understand merely covers the necessary expenses that one incurs in this materialistic land—as for the intellectual interest."

SWAMI MAHANANDA showed up at the haunted house with a large battered suitcase. The first thing he took out of it was an orange robe, which he put on in place of his shabby black coat. He looked more impressive at once. He also unfolded a small jointed tripod and lighted a piece of incense which he placed therein.

"I have decided to use the old Babylonian *tabalum tatbal*," he said. "If it does not wark nothing will, for there is no more powerful exorcism." The swami set up on the mantelpiece a row of candles made in the form of demons. He unstoppered a small bottle, and sprinkled water from it onto a branch of a tamarisk tree.

"Now," he said, "we're ready!"

At midnight the ghost arrived with a whoop.

"Whee! I'm a Bengal tiger with a toothache! I'm bad! Hear me moan? Hear my chains rattle? Nix, I haven't got any chains. Watch me drive out all this rotten landlord's tenants!"

The swami imperturbably struck a match and ignited the seven demon-candles. Then he faced the ghost and cried, waving the branch in intricate patterns:

"I raise the torch, their images I burn,

Of the *utukku*, the *shedu*, the *rabisu*, the *ekimmu*,

Of the *libu* and *klitu* and *ardat lili*,
And every evil that seizes hold of men!"

"Huh?" said the ghost. "Oh, hello, Giuseppe."

"Never mind my name before I was initiated," said the swami.

"Tremble, melt away, and disappear!

May your smoke rise to heaven,

May Shamash destroy your limbs, may
the son of Ea

The great magician, restrain your
strength!"

"Ouch," said the ghost, wavering slightly. "You play too rough." With which the ghost disappeared.

But at the same time he, or his double, reappeared.

"I'm so sorry!" bleated the newcomer. "If you'll stop the exorcism a minute I'll explain."

"Well?" said the swami.

"He's been drifting over the distillery again, getting drunk on the smells. Mercy me, what a lot of stuff you have here. It's too bad it won't work on Bogus."

"Oh, yes, it will," said the swami.

"Heh-heh," said Bogus, reappearing. "That's what you think. Ga wan, Phony."

Now he was addressing another ghost. "I don't need your help to settle with this dopey wizard."

Swami Mahananda began another spell. The second ghost, Phony, faded out. Then the first ghost, Bogus, flickered from sight and the other apparition came back into view.

"Stop it, Bogus!" he cried. "You've disgraced us enough for one evening." At this point he went out again and Bogus reappeared. The changes went on for a quarter-hour—first one apparition and then the other being banished.

Finally Swami Mahananda collapsed into a chair with his head in his hands. Bogus, who happened to be visible at that instant, sneered.

"What'd I tell ya?" he gloated. "You can't exorcise the ghost of Melvin Pye. Just wait till tomorrow night! I'll have enough power then really to fix this danged landlord!"

"Don't listen to him!" cried Phony, reappearing. "I'm the real ghost of Melvin Pye!" "You are not! I am!" The argument broke out again, and the two ghosts, still disputing, faded away.

"It is no use, gentlemen," groaned the swami. "I can banish any spirit by himself, but the *dvirupa* is too hard to—how should I say it?—get hold of. When you poosh one half out, you poosh the other half in. I go."

The swami took off his orange robe, jammed it into his suitcase, put away his other properties, clapped on his old black hat, and departed.

"Well!" said Conroy. "Now where does that leave us?"

"Search me," said Kalesky. "I don't think you want me on this job any more."

"Don't desert me, old man!" cried Conroy. "Didn't you hear his threats? He'll scare away all my tenants and ruin me! Please stay on a couple more days! Look into Pye's history again. There ought to be a clue there somewhere."

Kalesky shrugged.

"Okay, if you want it. But I don't promise nothing."

KALESKY began his hunt early the following morning. He found Pye's sister in another suburb, and from her he got more information.

Pye had undergone a strict upbringing while a boy, and had not been very happy. Twice during his mature life he had suffered complete lapses of memory. The first time, he came to himself to find that he had joined the Marines. He had served out his enlistment, and then gone back to the accounting work he had formerly followed. The second time he had come to himself in jail. As well as he could discover, he had spent the previous year drifting around as an itinerant laborer. He had landed in jail as a result of a weakness for visiting waterfronts and picking fights with sailors.

Pye's sister referred Kalesky to the psychiatrist who had treated Pye after his second break—a Dr. Ekstrom. Kalesky looked Ekstrom up in the telephone directory and went to his office.

Dr. William Ekstrom was a tall, slender man with silvery hair, who looked like an actor playing the part of a distinguished psychiatrist.

"Pye was a case of split personality," he said. "The hedonistic, adventurous aspects of his psyche, so sternly repressed in early life, collected in his subconscious to form a secondary personality. Twice this second idea-complex got the upper hand. It is as though two personalities, P-One and P-Two,

were alternating in their control of one body."

"You wouldn't kid me, Doc?" Kalesky asked. "Some people can have two minds in one body?"

"Yes, my dear chap, they can. I might have been able to cure Pye if he hadn't died when he did."

"How do you cure them?"

"You merge the two personalities under hypnosis. But look here; what's all this getting at? The man's dead, you know."

"Well, Doc," said Kalesky uncomfortably, "he is and he isn't. I mean."

"Yes?"

Kalesky finally told the story. When he had finished, Ekstrom nodded.

"Fascinating, my dear friend," he said. "Here, will you cross your knees a moment?" When Kalesky did so, Ekstrom smote him below the kneecap with a little rubber hammer. Kalesky's leg flew up.

"You don't have to worry about me being nuts," said Kalesky. "That stuffed shirt Conroy will tell you the same thing. Have you got an engagement this evening?"

"No, but—here, what have you in mind?" said Ekstrom suspiciously.

Kalesky opened his wallet and counted out five tens.

"If you could have merged him while he was alive, you can merge him when he's dead."

"Don't be silly, old man. I'm not a psychic researcher. But—" as Kalesky began to gather up the money "—it might be worth trying at that. You understand that if there's no ghost I keep the retainer."

"Sure. Get your hat and come along, Doc."

* * * * *

"We'll have to handle this carefully," Ekstrom said. "I understand that the hedonistic personality, or P-Two—the one called Bogus—is fond of alcohol. Who has a bottle of spirits?"

A bottle of whisky was produced. Ekstrom poured the contents into the bathtub and soaked a bath towel in the liquid, to faint groans from Conroy and Kalesky. Then he hung the towel in the living room. Soon the smell made the air hardly breathable.

"Ah-hah!" cried Bogus, oozing out of the fireplace. "Now I'm really going to town on your houses, you fresh little realtor, you! When I get through you won't have a tenant. Hello, aren't you that dumb little psychiatrist who was always trying to merge me with Phony?"

"Yes," said Ekstrom.

"Well, you can go stick your head in a bucket. I don't want any part of that wacky imitation ghost."

"That's all right, old fellow," said Ekstrom heartily. "Don't you like the liquor?"

Bogus sniffed. "Say, that's not bad stuff. Mean you fixed it up for me? Maybe I misjudged you, Doc. But no mergers with that sissy, understand!" He leaned back, as if reclining on an invisible sofa. "Hey, Phony, get a load of this!"

"Can you tell me why you ghosts wear suits instead of sheets?" Kalesky asked.

"Because we're buried in suits instead of sheets. That reminds me—aren't you the guy who came out of the closet with a sheet on and scared me out of my ectoplasm? I'll get even with you. Right now, though, I'm feeling too good." The ghost yawned.

EKSTROM took out a pocket flashlight. "Mr. Pye," he said. "Here's a little experiment that might interest you." He focused a spot of light on the ceiling, and moved it slowly back and forth. "Watch that spot. It's warm in here. Just the temperature for sleeping. Your eyelids are getting heavy. A feeling of numbness is stealing over you. You're falling asleep—asleep—asleep."

Five minutes of this reduced Bogus to a rigid, glassy-eyed wraith. Then the other ghost appeared.

"My goodness!" cried Phony. "What have you done to him, Doctor Ekstrom? I never thought anybody could control him, he's so wild. He pays no attention to the rules and gets away with it. Politics, you know."

"What rules?" asked Kalesky.

"Union rules, about haunting quietly and invisibly. We adopted them after so many haunted houses were torn down. It's a terrible thing to be a ghost whose house has been torn down."

"Do you have to haunt?" Conroy asked.

"Yes, sir. I was murdered here, so I have to haunt the house till my murder is avenged. But the felon who slew me is in prison for life, so I shall have to await his natural death."

"Don't getting sent up for life count as avenging a murder?" Kalesky asked.

"It would, only this burglar wasn't sentenced for murdering *me*. He killed one of his fellow-felons."

"I could have this house torn down," Conroy said thoughtfully.

"Deary me," said Phony. "You wouldn't do that, sir?"

"If I couldn't stop the haunting otherwise."

"But it wouldn't do any good. All the other houses in the block are built to the same plan as this. Practically speaking they *are* the same as this. So we'd have to haunt one of the others."

"You could tear down all the houses in the block," Kalesky said.

"Ow! Do you know what it costs to build, with crooked contractors and lazy workmen?" Conroy moaned. "It would ruin me! They're practically new, too; only twenty years old."

"I see your point of view, sir," said the ghost. "I wish I could help—"

"You can," broke in Ekstrom. "All we have to do is merge you with Bogus. The combined ghost would be a fine, well-balanced character who wouldn't give any trouble."

"What, merge me with that uncouth buffoon?" shrieked Phony, fluttering his transparent hands. "Horrors! A thousand times no!"

"Aw, come on!" wheedled Kalesky. "It won't be so bad."

"You want to do the right thing, don't you?" said Conroy.

"Trust me to know best, old chap," said Ekstrom.

After a prolonged argument the ghost gave in. "Hurry and get the horrid business over with," it wailed. "To think of my being submerged in that crass boor whom I despise!"

Ekstrom got to work with his flashlight, and soon had Phony stiff and stark like his twin. Then the psychiatrist said:

"You and Bogus are really parts of the same man. You must merge yourself with him. Each of you has virtues that the other lacks. You're only half a ghost as you are. Phony, go merge yourself with Bogus, to make a complete Melvin Pye."

Phony drifted dreamily over to where his double sprawled. He moved into the same position in the same place, whereupon there was but one ghost to be seen.

"Wake up, Melvin Pye!" cried Ekstrom.

The ghost of Melvin Pye awoke.

"Say, that's quite a trick, Doctor Ekstrom," he said, with a grin. "I remember everything that either of my former selves did."

The ghost stood up. He seemed a little larger and more substantial than either of his former components.

"Ha," he said. "Wish I'd been this way before. No telling what I'd have accomplished."

This was neither Melvin Pye, the mama's boy, nor Melvin Pye, the irresponsible rough-neck. It was Melvin Pye the Man of Destiny.

"But I can still accomplish a thing or two. You! You're that tightwad landlord, aren't you?"

"I—" began Conroy.

"Shut up! You know I can empty your houses just like *that*, don't you?"

"I—"

"Shut up! From now on you'll do as I say."

"I'll get the swami—"

THE ghost scowled.

"Shut up! I know enough about Giuseppe. He won't dare bother me. First, you've been letting these houses run down disgracefully. You'll have three oil-burners, two stoves, six refrigerators, and four plumbing systems in this block fixed, and no slipshod job either!"

"But—"

"Will you do as I say, or must I get tough?" snarled the ghost.

"Okay. But I—"

"Shut up! Then there's that tenant who used to live here, Rigoulot. He lost his job. You'll give him one."

"But I don't need a full-time draftsman!"

"Shut up! Then there's that Miss Winston who comes around to cook dinner for you. She loves you, gosh knows why. Marry her."

"What?"

"You heard me! No excuses, unless you want to have to tear down all your houses. I'll be back tomorrow to see how you're doing. I'll have thought of some more tasks by then. Good night, gentlemen." The ghost bowed briskly to Kalesky and Ekstrom, and vanished.

After a few seconds of silence, Ekstrom spoke.

"A very interesting experiment, gentlemen. The final result wasn't quite what I anticipated. I thought the united Pye would combine the timidity of Phony with the stupidity of Bogus, and be easy to handle. Instead he combined the intelligence and moral fervor of Phony with the aggressive belligerence of Bogus. So you'll have to play ball with him, old man—ha-ha—unless you want to lose your houses."

Conroy made a choked sound.

Ekstrom got up and looked at his watch.

"Ho-hum! I can just make the train back to town. A most interesting evening, gentlemen. I wish I dared write it up for the journals. Conroy old, fellow, where shall I send my bill? Your office—why, what are you looking at me like that for? You can't threaten me! Don't you dare touch me, Conroy! Kalesky, stop him! Help! *Ouch!*"

Seconds later, a tall, silver-haired man sprinted along the dark streets, while after him pounded, with clutching hand and blood-shot eye, the blocky figure of George Conroy. Ekstrom ran faster than Conroy—or the suburb would have had on its hands another ghost, doomed to haunt the site of its murder until suitably avenged.

Next Issue: TROUBLE ON TITAN, a Complete Novelet Featuring Tony Quade of Hollywood-on-the-Moon, by HENRY KUTTNER!

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(Ado.)

PHALID'S FATE

By JACK VANCE

His brain encased in the body of a giant insect on an alien planet, Ryan Wratch struggles against big odds to defeat the enemies menacing the lives of all Earthmen!

CHAPTER I

Weird Experiment



AFTER two months of unconsciousness, Ryan Wratch opened his eyes. Or more accurately, he folded into tight pleats two hundred tiny shutters of dirty purplish-brown tissue and thereupon looked out on a new world.

For twenty seconds Wratch stared at delirium made tangible, madness beyond all expression. He heard a staccato shrillness—this somehow he felt he should recognize. Then his brain relaxed, let go. Wratch once more lost consciousness.

* * * * *

Dr. Plogetz, who was short and stocky, with a smooth pink face and white hair, straightened up from the thing on the table, put down his lensed platoscope.

He turned to the man in the gray-green uniform who wore just above his elbow the three golden sunbursts of a Sector Commander. The Commander was thin, brown and tough, with a rather harsh and humorless expression.

"Organically, everything is in excellent shape," said the doctor. "The nerve junctures are healed, the blood adapters function beautifully—"

He broke off as the black alien shape on the padded table—a thing with a large insect-seeming head, a long black carapace over its back like a cloak, oddly jointed legs—stirred one of its arm-members—these, rubbery tentacles with mottled gray undersides,

haphazard grayish finger flaps.

Dr. Plogetz picked up his platoscope, inspected the organs inside the chitin-plated torso.

"Reflex," he murmured. "As I was saying, there's no doubt it's a healthy creature organically. Psychologically—" he pursed his lips—"naturally it's too early to warrant any guesses."

Sector Commander Sandion nodded his head.

"When will it, or he, I should say, regain consciousness?"

Dr. Plogetz pressed a stud in his wrist band. A voice sounded from the tiny speaker.

"Yes, doctor?"

"Bring in a sonfrane hood—let's see—about a number twenty-six." "Then he said to Sandion: "I'll give him a stimulant—revive him at once. But first—"

A nurse entered—a dark-haired, blue eyed, very beautiful nurse—bringing a hood.

"Now, Miss Elder," said Dr. Plogetz, "adjust it completely around the optic slit. Take care not to bind those little gill-flaps at the side of the head."

PLOGETZ took a deep breath before continuing with his explanation.

"I want to minimize the shock on the brain," explained the doctor. "The visual images no doubt will be confusing, to say the least. The Phalid's color spectrum, remember, is twice as long, the field of vision three or four times as wide as that of the average human being. It has two hundred eyes, and the impressions of two hundred separate optic units must be coordinated and merged. A human brain accommodates to two images, but it's questionable whether

AN AMAZING COMPLETE NOVELET



She screamed again, and her agony smote Watch's brain

it could do the same for two hundred. That's why we've left intact a bit of the creature's former brain—the nodule coordinating the various images." Here Plogetz paused long enough to give the complex black head an appraising glance.

"Even with this help, Wratch's sight will be a new and fantastic thing," he mused. "All pictures seen through Phalid eyes and merged by that bit of Phalid brain will be something never envisioned by human mind."

"No doubt it will be a tremendous strain on his nerves," observed Sandion.

The doctor nodded, inspected the blind-fold.

"Two cc. of three per cent arthrodine," he said to the nurse. Then again to Sandion: "We've left intact another nodule of the former brain, the speech formation and recognition center, a matter probably as essential as his visual organization. The rest of the brain it was necessary to excise—a pity in some ways. The memories and associations would be invaluable to your young man, and the Phalids undoubtedly have special senses I'd be interested getting a first hand report of."

"Ah, yes," said the doctor as the nurse handed him a hypodermic. "Peculiar affair," he continued, using the hypodermic. "I can graft a human brain into this—this creature; whereas if I transferred a brain into another human body, I'd kill that brain." He gave the empty hypodermic back to the nurse, wiped his hands. "Strange world we live in, isn't it, Commander?"

Commander Sandion gave him a quick sardonic glance and a nod.

"Strange world indeed, Doctor."

* * * * *

Personality, the sense of his own distinctive ego, drifted up from a murky limbo. For the second time Ryan Wratch folded the two hundred little screens in the eyeslit that ran more than halfway around what was now *his* head. He saw nothing but blackness, felt an oppression before his vision.

He lay quietly, remembering the crazy welter of light and shape and unknown color he had seen before, and for the moment was content to lie in the dark.

Gradually he became aware of new sensations in the functioning of his body. He was no longer breathing. Instead, a continuous current of air blew along throbbing conduits, out the gill flaps at his head. At what point he inhaled he could not determine.

He became conscious of a peculiar tactile sensitivity, an exact perception of texture. The sensitive areas were on the underside and tips of his arm-members, with the rest of his body less sensitive. In this way he knew the exact quality of the cloth under him, felt the weave, the lay of the threads, the essential, absolute intrinsic nature of the fiber.

He heard strident harsh sounds. Suddenly, and with a feeling of shock, he realized that these were human voices. They were calling his name.

"Wratch! Do you understand me? Move your right arm if you do."

Wratch moved his right arm-member.

"I understand you very well," he said. "Why can't I see?" He spoke instinctively, without thought, not listening to his voice. Something strange caused him to stop and ponder. The words had coursed smoothly from his brain to the bone at the sounding diaphragm in his chest. When he spoke the voice sounded natural on the hair tendrils under the carapace at his back—his hearing members. But after an instant's groping Wratch's brain realized that the voice had not been human. It had been a series of drones and buzzes, very different from the one which had questioned him.

NOW HE tried to enunciate the language of men, and found it impossible. His speech organ was ill-adapted to sibilants, nasals, dentals, fricatives, explosives—although vowels he could indicate by pitching the tone of his voice. After a moment's effort he realized his own unintelligibility.

"Are you trying to speak English?" came the question. "Move right arm for yes, left for no."

Wratch moved his right tentacle. Then deciding he wished to see, felt at the eye-slit to find what was obstructing his vision. A detaining touch restrained him.

"You'd better leave the hood as it is for the present, until you become a little more familiar with the Phalid's body."

Wratch, recollecting the dazzle that had first greeted him, dropped the tentacle.

"I don't understand how he so quickly masters the use of his members," said Sandion.

"The Phalid nervous system is essentially similar to the human," said Dr. Plogetz. "Wratch forms a volition in his brain, passes it through the adapters to the vertebral cord,

and reflexes take care of the rest. Thus, when he tries to walk, if he attempted to direct the motion of each leg, he'd be clumsy and awkward. However if he merely tells the body to walk, it will walk naturally, automatically."

Plogetz looked back to the creature on the table.

"Are you comfortable? Are your senses clear?"

Wratch jerked his right tentacle.

"Do you feel any influence of the Phalid's will? That is, is there any conflict upon your brain from the body?"

Wratch thought. Apparently there was not. He felt as much Ryan Wratch as he ever had, though there was the sense of being locked up, of an unnatural imprisonment.

He tried to speak once more. Strange, he thought, how easy the Phalid speech came to him, a tongue he had never heard. As before he failed to arrive at even an approximation to human speech.

"Here's a pencil and a writing board," said the voice. "Writing blindfolded perhaps'll be difficult, but try it."

Wratch grasped the pencil and fighting an impulse to scribble a line of vibrating angles, wrote:

"Can you read this?"

"Yes," said the voice.

"Who are you? Dr. Plogetz?"

"Yes."

"Operation a success?"

"Yes."

"I seem to know the Phalid language. I speak it automatically. I mean my brain thinks and the voice comes out in Phalid."

"That's nothing to wonder at." How shrill was Dr. Plogetz' voice! Wratch remembered how it had sounded before the transfer—a normal, pleasant, rather deep baritone. "We left a segment of the Phalid's brain in the head-case—the node of language production and comprehension. An ignorance of the Phalid tongue would be very inconvenient for you. We've also left the node which co-ordinates the images of the two hundred eyes—there'd be only a blur otherwise. Even as it is, I imagine you'll notice considerable distortion."

Considerable distortion! thought Wratch. Ha! if Dr. Plogetz could only look at a color photograph of what he'd seen.

Another voice addressed Wratch, a voice even shriller, with a flat rasp that grated upon Wratch's new nerves.

"Hello, Wratch. It's Sandion—Commander Sandion."

Wratch remembered him well enough, a thin-brown man, very bitter and intense, who carried much of the responsibility in the campaign against the mysterious Phalids. It was Sandion who had questioned him after the strange little brush out by Kordecker Three-forty-three in Sagittarius, where the Phalids had killed Wratch's two brothers and left Wratch dying.

"Hello Commander," wrote Wratch. "How long have I been unconscious?"

"Nearly two months."

Wratch buzzed surprise.

"What has been happening?"

"They've attacked fifteen more ships—fifteen at least, all around the sky. Ships burnt out, crews and passengers dead or missing. They waylaid three battle-cruisers, at separate times of course—one in Hercules, one in Andromeda, and another not three light years beyond Procyon."

"Getting bolder!" Wratch wrote.

"They can afford to," said Sandion bitterly. "They've whittled our battle-fleet down a third already. They've got so cursed much mobility. We're like a blind man trying to whip twenty midgets with long knives. And not knowing the location of their home planet, we're helpless."

"That's my job," wrote Wratch. "Don't forget I owe them something myself. My two brothers."

"Um," Sandion grunted, and said gruffly: "Your job—and your suicide."

Wratch nodded his body. His head, mounted on the horny collar which topped the black carapace, could not be nodded.

"When Plogetz got to me I was dying—ninety-nine percent dead. What do I lose?"

Sandion grunted again. "Well, I've got to run along. Take it easy and rest." He grinned sardonically at Miss Elder. "Lucky dog that you are, with a beautiful nurse and all."

Lot of good that does me, thought Ryan Wratch.

Sector Commander Sandion went to the port, whose faintly grayed crystal transmitted a view of a dozen glistening towers set in parks and lakes, meshes of slender skyways, swarming air-traffic. Sandion's air-car, magnetically gripped to the park-rail, hung outside Dr. Plogetz' office. He climbed in, and the car darted off toward the Space Control Tower, toward his office and his end-

less study of space charts.

Dr. Plogetz turned back to Wratch.

"Now," he said, "I'm going to take away the hood. Don't worry or wonder about the confusion. Just relax and look around."

CHAPTER II

Phalid Space Ship

TWO WEEKS later Wratch was able to move around his suite of rooms without falling over the furniture. That is not to say he was seeing things as he saw them before. It was like learning to see all over again in a world four times as complex. Even so, if Wratch's future had held the slightest hope for anything other than a desperate friendless struggle, a final dreary death, he might have enjoyed the experience.

Now, in spite of all, he was constantly amazed and charmed by the colors, the tones and shades—ardent, cool, gloomy, fiery, mystic. These imparted to everything he saw a semblance new and wonderful.

The human eye sees red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet. Wratch had seven more colors—three below red, three above violet. Then there was another wave-length to which his two hundred eyes were sensitive—a color far up the spectrum, a glorious misty color. All this he determined with the aid of a small spectroscope Dr. Plogetz gave him.

He described the single high band of color to Dr. Plogetz, who was very interested in all Wratch's observations, and who suggested that Wratch call this color "kalychrome," a word, according to Dr. Plogetz, derived from the Greek. Wratch was willing, inasmuch as the Phalid word for the color was phonetically "zz-za-mmm," more or less—a rather awkward term to be writing on the blackboard Dr. Plogetz had brought him. The other colors were called sub-red 1, sub-red 2, sub-red 3, super-violet 1, super-violet 2, super-violet 3.

It fascinated Wratch merely to look out across the city, to watch the changing colors of the sky—which was no longer blue, but a tint of blue and super-violets 1 and 2. The towers were no longer towers. Distorted by the Phalid's visual node, they appeared to Wratch as ugly spindles, and the tapered little air-cars which before he had thought sleek and beautiful seemed squat and mis-

shapen. Nothing in fact, appeared as before. The Phalid eyes and Phalid brain segment altered the semblance of everything.

Men and women had grotesquely ceased to be human beings. They had become scurrying little leprous things, flat-faced, with moist unpleasant features.

But in compensation for his loss of human faculties, Wratch discovered within himself a power which may or may not have been previously latent within his brain.

Lacking normal perception of the people around him, unable to interpret facial expression, tone of voice, the hundred little social mannerisms, Wratch gradually discovered that in any event he was aware of their inward emotions. Perhaps it was a universal faculty, perhaps a Phalid attribute locked into the two little brain-nodes.

He never knew exactly, but in this way Wratch learned that the beautiful Miss Elder was sickened and frightened when her duties brought her near him; that Dr. Plogetz, a very cold and exact scientist, considered him with little feeling other than intense interest.

It rather puzzled Wratch, in connection with Miss Elder, to find that she no longer seemed beautiful. He remembered her, a gorgeous creature with lustrous dark hair, large tender eyes, a body supple as a weeping willow. To his two hundred eyes now, Miss Elder was a pallid biped with a face like a deep-sea globefish, a complexion no more pleasant than a slab of raw liver.

And when he looked at himself in a mirror—ah! What an infinitely superior creature, said his eyes—tall, stately, graceful! What a glossy carapace, what supple arm tentacles! A noble countenance, with keen horizon-scanning eyes, an alert beak, and what symmetrical black whisker-sponges! Almost regal in appearance.

And Ryan Wratch grew somewhat uneasy to find how completely he was forced to accept the Phalid's version of outward events and he put himself on continual guard against the subtle influence of his alien senses.

Sector Commander Sandion came back one day. Gravely he shook one of Wratch's tentacles.

"I understand you're adapting yourself very well," said Sandion.

Wratch still found it impossible to talk the language of men. He went to the blackboard.

"When do I start?" he wrote.

SANDION appeared to Wratch as a mud-colored warped thing, nervously agile as a lizard.

"You can start tomorrow, if you're ready," Sandion said.

"!!!" wrote Wratch; then: "What's the brief?"

"In the last week, two patrol corvettes and two Trans-Space liners have been destroyed, out near Canopus," said Sandion. "Crews and passengers, those who weren't killed, all whisked away. The Phalids are apparently maintaining a strong force somewhere near. They've got scouts all through the area. We've seen and destroyed three or four little two-man boats, no bigger than an air-car. Well, tomorrow you leave for Canopus in another corvette. You'll patrol slowly until attacked. Then the crew will leave in lifeboats, taking their chances on making Lojuk by Fitzsimmon's Star where we've an astroscopic station.

"Thereupon you will follow the procedure we've already discussed."

"I'm ready," wrote Ryan Wratch.

* * * * *

"Well, damnit," said Capt. Dick Humber, and he threw his helmet into the bucket seat. "We can't do anything more but send out printed invitations. Nine blasted days and we haven't even spotted a blast track."

"Perhaps we *won't* see anything," said Cabron, the pessimistic navigator. "Perhaps there'll just be a flash and we'll be dead."

Humber glanced at the long black form gazing out the port.

"Well, you've got more to look forward to than Wratch," he said mildly. "Wratch begins where you leave off."

A black tentacle twitched.

"So far Wratch has done pretty well for himself," grumbled Cabron. "I don't know how many hands he can look into with all those blasted eyes, but I know he's eight hundred munits ahead in the poker game."

Wratch grinned inwardly. It was so easy reading joy, doubt, dismay in opponents' minds, and as he had no intention of collecting, winning, especially from the gloomy but emphatic Cabron, seemed a harmless pastime.

A hoarse alarm whistle. A second of frozen inaction.

"Hit the boats!" cried Capt. Dick Humber. "This is it!"

A well disciplined rush, ports opening, slamming, dogging down.

"So long, Wratch! Good luck!" Captain Humber squeezed the black tentacle. He climbed through the opening, the vent that led from capture by the stealthy Phalids to safety at Lojuk. Wratch restrained the small impulse to follow, saw the lifeboat's port blink shut an instant before the hull port snapped back.

The hiss of compressed air cartridges, four shocks as four lifeboats were kicked out from their cradles. Silence.

This was it, thought Wratch. Up to now, it had all been speculation and tentative procedure. If the Phalids contacted them, if the men got away, if. . . .

According to the plan, Wratch slipped his arm-members into a manacle, clicked it shut, waited for his compatriots to release him. Or for quick blasting death, should they be insufficiently reassured by the flight of the four lifeboats.

But the minutes passed and still no vast silent flare—the Phalid weapon-field neutralizing molecular bonds, dissolving matter to loose wild atoms.

A great shape floated across the space-ports—a tremendous bulk, as large as Earth's greatest passenger liners.

Presently a bump on the hull, and a scrape as a tender from the other ship shackled close.

The port swung open. Wratch saw the flicker of dark bodies . . . just as before, out by Kordecker 343 in Sagittarius where they'd killed his two brothers, and fleeing in an Earth cruiser, left behind one of their number, whose body Ryan Wratch now wore.

Three Phalids entered, the arm-tentacles grasping queerly-fashioned blast-rifles: alien mysterious creatures, whom only one man—Ryan Wratch—had ever seen and lived to tell the tale. And Ryan Wratch could not now have long to live, and never, he thought, would he tell the tale.

They saw him, hesitated in their steps. How noble the figures, to Ryan Wratch's Phalid eyes, how stately the stride! Wratch felt with his brain for the emotions he had been able to detect in men, but drew blank. Were emotions, then, a human attribute? Or did Wratch's telepathic faculty operate solely on Earth brains?

UNCERTAIN whether or not the Phalids possessed the faculty, Wratch tried to achieve a state of pleasure and welcome.

But the Phalids seemed quickly to become

indifferent to him. They reconnoitered the ship and finding nothing, returned. Then, to Wratch's surprise, they again ignored him, began to leave the ship.

"A moment," he called in the Phalid's buzzing language. "Release your brother from these cursed metal bonds."

They halted, and peered at him, taken somewhat aback, so it seemed to Wratch.

"Impossible," said one. "You well know the *Bza*—" the word they used was untranslatable, but meant "custom, order, regulation, usual practice"—"which makes necessary the prime report to Zau-amuz." So the name, or title, sounded to Wratch.

"I weaken, I am faint," complained Wratch.

"Patience!" buzzed the Phalid sharply; and with a tinge of doubt, "Where is the Phalid forbearance, the stoicism?"

Wratch became aware that his conduct was at odds with established code and quickly lapsed to passivity.

Ten minutes later the three returned, gathered up the ship's log, and one or two instruments which excited their interest. Almost as an afterthought one stepped over to Wratch.

"The key is on that shelf," buzzed Wratch.

He was released, and forced an emotion of relief and thankfulness through his mind. He followed them into the small boxlike boat, marveling at the casualness with which they accepted him.

He stood silent in a corner of the little boat as they flew to the great hulk which floated ten miles distant, and the Phalids were equally silent. Had they no curiosity?

How beautiful the great Phalid ship, hanging dull-gleaming in black space, seemed to Wratch's Phalid eyes, how much more graceful and powerful-seeming than the squat stubby vessels of the scurrying little Earthmen!

Such was the message of Wratch's eyes. But his brain was tense and wary. He was afraid, too, but fear had so long been a minor consideration now, that he was unaware of it. Wratch had long ago reconciled himself to death. Torture would be unpleasant. He repressed a human impulse to shrug. His own body was dead, burnt now to a handful of ash, and he knew that never again would he see the planet where he had been born. But if by some fantastic chance he completed his present mission, thousands, maybe millions—even maybe billions—of lives would be made secure.

Wratch watched closely to discover the controls of the boat, for perhaps sometime he might have need of the knowledge. They were comparatively simple, he discovered, arrayed in a system which seemed universal and standard wherever intelligent creatures built space-craft. In essence a guide-lever was mounted on a universal pivot for steering purposes and a bracket-wheel furnished speed control.

They drew close to the Phalid ship, a dark cylinder flat at top and bottom, with longitudinal driving bands of sub-red metal.

The box-like little tender drew close, slowed, poised, fitted itself into a recess in the side of the ship, and the ports snapped open.

Wratch followed the Phalids out into the passageway. Here, to his amazement, they abandoned him, stalked away in different directions, leaving him standing non-plussed in the corridor, unattended, unquestioned, apparently at his own devices.

How different from the discipline of an Earth's ship! The rescued man would have been hustled in a flurry of excitement to the Commander's office. Questions would have been barked at him, his memory searched for any detail of enemy arrangements he conceivably might have noted.

Wratch stood puzzled in the corridor, and Phalids of the ship, intent on their duties, pushed past him. He tried to reason out the situation. Perhaps he had been detected and was being given rope to test his intentions? Somehow he could not believe this. The attitude of those who had brought him aboard was much too casual for craftiness. If they had trickery in mind, so Wratch thought, they undoubtedly would have questioned him in some summary fashion, and apparently satisfied, released him under close scrutiny.

But perhaps there was no trickery. Wratch remembered that an alien race could not be judged by human standards.

On none of the Phalids could he observe badges or marks of rank. Each seemed to have some especial duty, like extremely intelligent ants, thought Wratch.

In that case, when he was brought aboard, there would be no need to take him for questioning; it would be assumed that his own instincts and training would lead him to his duty automatically. This hypothesis might explain the delay in un-manacling him from the stanchion in the corvette. A race of individuals—like the Earthmen—would have

been impelled by surprise, curiosity, sympathy, before they made a second move, to free a shackled fellow.

Wratch wandered down the passageway, peering into the chambers opening to either side as he progressed. He saw and marveled, yet he could not be sure of what he saw because of his deceitful Phalid vision.

At the after end he found machines his intelligence told him must be propulsion engines. He strode down a thwart-ship passage and started forward once more.

CHAPTER III

With the Enemy

FROM all appearances the plan of the ship was two parallel longitudinal corridors at opposite sides of the ship, with—as in Earth ships—the controls forward, the driving engines aft. Design, engineering, mechanics—all were universal concepts, thought Wratch, and brought the most efficient working out of a given problem in about the same way. As with Earthmen, so with Phalid. Here the problem was the best way of crossing space. The solution, a space-ship not greatly differentiated mechanically from Earth ships.

In spite of his seeming liberty, Wratch was puzzled and uneasy. He had been expecting suspicion, intense scrutiny, perhaps quick exposure for what he was. It was unnatural to have all ignore him.

Now his uncertainty was dispelled. A great buzzing voice permeated the ship.

"Where is he who was found on the ship of the insect-men? He has not yet come before Zau-amuz." The voice carried puzzled rather than suspicious, overtones.

Where, who, is Zau-amuz? Wratch wondered. Where would he go to find him? If the situation was as in an Earth ship, it would be forward and high over the bow. He hastened his steps in this direction, watching through each portal for any hint or sign.

A glimpse he caught through a barred door of two or three dozen human beings, whether men or women his Phalid sight could not tell. He hesitated, paused an instant to look. But they could wait. Now he was anxious to find Zau-amuz before a search or an inquiry should be made, before he and his fal-

sity should be discovered.

In a chamber below the pilot house Wratch saw one he knew was the master of the ship. The chamber was decorated in a style that charmed his Phalid senses—a soft rug of two over-violet tones, walls of a blue tint covered with fantastically rich fret-work, low furniture of pink and white plastic, inset with medallions of the color high in the spectrum which Dr. Plogetz had called "kalychrome."

Zau-amuz was a tremendous Phalid, twice Wratch's size, with super-developed brain and oversized abdomen. Its carapace was enameled an over-violet shade. Its legs seemed to be under-developed, too weak to support its weight for any length of time. It reclined on a long pallet, and Wratch's eyes thought, what glory and majesty are embodied here in Zau-amuz.

Entirely ignorant of correct procedure, but hoping that formal courtesy, rigid rules of ceremony were customs not practiced by the Phalids, Wratch advanced slowly.

"Revered one, I am he who was removed from the ship of the insect-men," said Wratch.

"You are dilatory," said the great Phalid. "Also where is your sense of Bza?"—the untranslatable word meaning "custom, regulation, ancient manners."

"Your pardon, intelligence. As a prisoner of the insect-men, I have seen such unpleasantness, that, added to my joy at rejoining my comrades, my senses have temporarily lost their fullest efficiency."

"Ah, yes," admitted the Phalid lord. "Such events are not unheard of. How did you chance to fall into the hands of the insect-things?"

Wratch related the incidents of the taking of the Phalid whose body he wore.

"Situation understood," said Zau-amuz. None of the brusqueness, the sharpness that Wratch associated with Earth discipline was evident. Instead the Phalid seemed to take for granted the loyalty and industry of his fellows. "Have you any significant observations to report?"

"None, grandeur, except that the insect-men were so terrified at the approach of this ship that they fled in the wildest panic."

"We have already observed that," said Zau-amuz, with the faintest hint of boredom. "Go. Perform some needful duty. If your senses do not adjust themselves, throw yourself into space."

"I go, magnificence."

Wratch withdrew, well-pleased with the course of the interview. He was an accredited member of the ship's company. The inquisition had been simpler than any he could have imagined. Now if only the ship put back to the Phalid home-planet, if he were allowed a few moments aground by himself, all might be well.

HE WANDERED about the ship and presently came to a dark hall evidently intended for the absorption of nourishment. Here were twenty or thirty Phalids, ladling brown porridge into the stomach sac in their chest, champing on stalks of a celery-like growth, plucking segments from clusters like bunches of grapes, stuffing them into the stomach sac. These grape bunches seemed to be the most appetizing. In fact Wratch became aware of a great hunger in his body for these grape-things, a need like a thirsty man longing for water.

He entered, and as unobtrusively as possible, took a bunch from a tub and let his body feed itself. To his surprise, he discovered the little objects were alive, that they squirmed and writhed in his finger flaps, and pulsed frantically in his stomach sac. But they were delicious; and they filled him with a sense of wonderful well-being. He wanted very much to take a second bunch, but possibly, he thought, it was not correct etiquette. So he waited till he saw one of the other Phalids reach for a second clump, and then he did likewise.

After his meal he went to the Earth-people's prison. The door was inset with a heavy transparent plate and was barred with a simple exterior bar. Inside he noted two Phalids moving around among the Earthmen, feeling them, scrutinizing their skin and eyes, like veterinarians inspecting cattle.

Wratch became slightly nauseated. Poor devils, he thought, and pitied them as he never did himself. He, at least, had a duty to spur him—and then the Phalids had killed his brothers. He hated them. But the captives here, they were cattle being taken to slaughter, bewildered, frightened, innocent.

A sudden project formed itself in his mind. Perhaps, with no risk to himself he could manage it.

He reconnoitered back along the passage-way, counted about thirty paces from the prison to the entrance port of the ship's tender. The tender was large enough, Wratch thought, to accommodate, with some crowd-

ing, the twenty or thirty Earth people. He had noticed emergency canisters of water in the tender, and presumably there would be food. In any event, it was a better prospect than being taken as prisoners to the Phalid home-planet.

The passage-way was temporarily clear. Wratch quickly made sure that the port was free to be opened, returned to the prison.

The two Phalids who were within were at a point of leaving, were conducting one of the captives between them, one who hung back and cried in terror. But they took this one out of the prison, into the corridor. Wratch waited till they stalked on black jointed legs out of sight; then he lifted the bar, entered the cell.

The prisoners looked at him apathetically and Wratch, consciously noting such features as longer hair, lesser stature, saw that about half of the prisoners were women, evidently taken from a passenger ship destroyed by the Phalids.

A pencil protruded from the breast pocket of one man. Wratch stepped over, took this, and picking up a piece of paper from the deck, retired to an inconspicuous corner and wrote:

"I am no true Phalid. I will help you escape. Tell your comrades. You may speak to me in English. I understand."

He handed the message to the man nearest him.

The man read, looked at Wratch astounded.

"Hey, Wright, Chapman, look here!" he cried and passed the note to two others. In a moment the note had been read by everyone.

They were displaying too much excitement. Wratch feared lest a Phalid passing by look in and be warned by the unusual activity. He wrote another note.

"Act more naturally. I will stand outside the door. When I beckon, come out quickly, turn to the right, enter the second port to your left, about thirty yards down the passage. Inside is a lifeboat, with simple controls. This must be done *fast*." He underlined the word "fast." "When you are in the lifeboat, then you are on your own. The propulsion regulator is the bracket-wheel. The lifeboat is released by two grips just inside the port."

They read this.

"How do we know it's not a trick?" came one voice.

"Trick or not, it's a chance," said the first man. "Go ahead," he told Wratch. "We'll wait for your sign."

WRATCH waved his tentacle in what he hoped was a reassuring sign, left the prison, leaving the door unbarred. The passageway was empty. Listen as he could, he could hear no sound of approaching footsteps, the slow *clack—clack—clack* made by the horn rim around the spongy center of a Phalid's foot against the polished composition deck.

He flung open the door, beckoned to the tense Earth-people; then he himself quickly loped down the passageway, to be as far distant as possible from the scene of the escape.

But around the first angle he met the two Phalids who had come from the prison, now returning the one they had taken away whom Wratch now saw to be a woman. He must delay them, although as a last resort there was always that which he carried in his little emergency case, strapped high and inconspicuous up under his carapace.

But that was to be used only as the last resort. He planted himself in the passageway.

"What are your conclusions as to the intelligence of this race?" he asked.

They paused, scrutinized him.

"They have a queer and whimsical sense of values," said one of the Phalids. "Their actions are governed not by *Bza*, the ordained way, but rather by individual volition."

"What a strange madhouse their homeworld must be!" exclaimed Wratch.

"Undoubtedly," said the second Phalid. They were betraying signs of impatience. But Wratch, in addition to his desire for delay, actually sought information. He wanted to know why prisoners were being taken, transported to the Phalid planet. He knew, however, that a direct question might arouse suspicion. He tried indirection.

"But will these be sufficiently amenable for our purposes?"

"Probably," was the answer. "Thievery is a task peculiarly adapted to their unpredictable guile."

Thievery? Were Earthmen being captured and transported across light-years of space by some tremendous cosmic crime syndicate? But the two Phalids with no more ado pushed past Wratch. Anxiously he hurried behind them, dreading lest he find the Earthmen yet filing down the passageway. If they had been quick, they would be in the tender and already clear of the ship. And given ten or fifteen minutes' start, it would

be a difficult job finding them again.

The Phalids reached the prison, opened the portal, shoved the lone prisoner inside. Then they stood transfixed by surprise. The prison was empty.

Buzzing sharply they withdrew from the cell, stood in earnest colloquy. Wratch, satisfied, ducked out of sight down the passageway.

Presently the ship, quivered, slowed, while the Phalids searched the void for their stolen lifeboat. But if the Earthmen had been crafty, had coasted quietly after the first brief burst of power, only chance would discover them again.

In a few moments the Phalid ship again resumed its speed, and slowed no more, and Wratch guessed the prisoners had made good their escape.

With nothing better to do, and feeling like a weird passenger on a weirder pleasure cruise, Wratch wandered about the ship, watching, listening, but overhearing little of importance. The Phalids communicated rarely among themselves, probably because they were all of identical mold. Personality seemed to be a concept incomprehensible to the Phalid mind.

Wratch found only one transparent port on the entire ship—in the pilot blister above the bow, just over *Zau-amuz'* chamber. Here Wratch ventured, half-expecting to be questioned or ejected, but neither of the two Phalids at the controls took the slightest notice of him.

Wratch looked about the sky for familiar star-patterns, and for the first time regretted the seven new colors in his spectrum. Because the stars were entirely different in guise, some bright in over-violet, others in sub-red.

Wratch felt completely lost.

He made a stealthy search for star-charts, but none were in evidence, and Wratch did not dare ask for any.

He found himself wandering back toward the prison, as a criminal is supposed to return to the scene of his crime. The truth was, Wratch had been worrying about the one wretched prisoner left behind. How great must be her misery, he thought, aggravated by her solitude!

He peered through the panel. There she sat, resting her chin on her hands. Wratch knew she was a woman by the length of her hair; otherwise his Phalid eyes gave him no hint as to her appearance.

CHAPTER IV

Earth Girl

WITHOUT thinking Wratch unbarred the door and let himself into the cell, though later, he cursed himself for exposing the entire project to such a risk. Suppose his interest in the prisoner should excite suspicion? Suppose he should be taken before Zau-amuz and this time searchingly questioned?

As he approached, the woman looked up, and Wratch sensed her brain undergoing a change from apathy to dull horror and hate. Yet underlying was a strange dogged vitality that could not but win his admiration, even though to his eyes she seemed an unpleasant white moist thing, with a head surmounted by a fibrous matted mass of hair.

"The others have escaped and I think they are safe," he wrote. "I helped them. I am sorry you were out of the cell at the time. Keep your chin up. You have a friend aboard."

Amazement seeped into her brain followed by little doubtful tendrils of hope.

"Who are you?" came her voice, halting, puzzled. "Almost you write like a man would write."

"I am a man, so to speak," wrote Wratch. "There's a man's brain inside this ugly skull-case."

She looked at him, and he felt the sudden warm glow of her admiration.

"You are very brave," she said.

"So are you," he wrote; then on an impulse: "Don't feel too desperate. I'll try my best to help you!"

"I don't mind so much—now," she said. "It's just knowing there's—someone nearby. I hated being alone."

"I've got to go," wrote Wratch. "It wouldn't do to be caught here. I'll be back as soon as it's safe."

As he stalked out the door, his brain caught her wonder and thankfulness, and a hint of a pleasant, warm friendliness.

The interview with the woman cheered Wratch. Alien and disassociated from humanity as he had become, his brain had gradually been changing to a cold and mechanical thing, a thinking device. And, thought Wratch with a sudden twinge of bitterness, actually

he was no more than that—a mechanism with a certain function to perform before it submitted to destruction.

Once he turned the switch that would consummate his mission, if he ever got that far, his life would be worth no more than a mote of astral dust.

Somehow, seeing the woman prisoner, whose predicament was in some ways worse than his own, but who had not even the satisfaction of performing a duty—seeing this woman, feeling the warmth of her brain, had created within him an impulse to live again as a human being. Which, to begin with, was impossible. His own body was dead, and according to Dr. Plogetz, his brain would not possibly survive in another human body.

Time passed. Days? Weeks? Wratch never knew. Two or three times he paid fleeting visits to the prisoner. She was a young woman, he decided, rather than middle-aged, taking for evidence the clean contour of her chin and jaw and a certain buoyancy of her step.

The visits always cheered him, and perversely left him with a sense of dissatisfaction with what life had given him. There had been so much that Ryan Wratch had missed, although conversely, he had experienced much that was never given to more careful Earth-bound men: the solemnity of plunging through endless black void alone, the thrill of landfall on a strange planet, the companionship of his two brothers in the rude pleasures of space outposts, the fascination of sighting an uncharted planet out on the border between known and unknown, a world which might show him some new and wondrous beauty or a rich civilization, rare new metal or jewels, ruins of a cosmic antiquity.

Indeed there was a wonderful fascination to space exploration and free-lance trading, and Wratch knew that even if he were given a new lease on life, never again could he reconcile himself to a quiet existence on Earth.

And yet Wratch thought of the things life had withheld from him. The color, the brilliant gayety of Earth's cosmopolite cities during this most spectacular and prosperous period in world history; the music, the television, the spectacles, the resort towns, almost feverish in the pace of their pleasures; the society of civilized women, with their laughter, beauty, youth.

ANGRILY Wratch thrust these thoughts from his mind. He was a—how had he put it?—a mechanism with a certain function to perform before it could permit itself to be destroyed.

Thus time passed, and light-years dwindled behind the Phalid space-vessel. But whether they progressed away from Sol, toward it, or with it broad on the beam, Wratch had no idea. He paced the corridors, rested in the dark soft-floored room set aside for this use, fed himself. The grape-things he had only eaten once, since which time he had felt sated of them, and so gave his stomach sac only the brown porridge and the dark red celery growth.

None of the other Phalids bothered him, none questioned him, none seemed to notice his lack of occupation. Each Phalid had a job to do, performed it with a maximum of efficiency. Wratch had the notion, however, that in an emergency, a Phalid could and would act with promptitude and initiative; but constitutionally it was built to follow routine—*Bza*—blindly, to let responsibility rest on the horny black shoulders of those such as *Zau-amuz*.

Then one day, Wratch, strolling dully through the engine room, noted an unusual alertness and scurry. He hurried up to the pilot blister, and from the space-port saw a great gray world below. Off to the side hung a dim greenish star.

This was the Phalid home-world whose position was a shrouded secret to those of the Tellurian Space Navy. This was Wratch's goal.

Wratch scanned the sky, but try as he might, he could recognize none of the stellar landmarks that, in space emergencies, made dead-reckoning navigation possible. The Pleiades, the Orion group, the Coal Sack, Corona—those and twenty others whose semblance from every angle was pounded into the heads of student navigators.

Wratch watched the face of the planet draw near, saw misty continents, brackish looking seas.

He became aware that the pilots were regarding him with puzzled attention from their wide optic slits.

"We make port, brothers," one of the pilots said. "How is it you are not at your duty?"

"My duty is here," said Wratch, thinking quickly, hoping he had not chosen the wrong reply. "I observe cloud-shapes as we land."

"Is that the will of *Zau-amuz*?" persisted

the Phalid. "It is strange, for it is not *Bza*. There is some mistake. I will ask the Named One." He took a sensitive rod, pressed it to his chest diaphragm.

"Where is the duty of the one who is expected to note cloud-shapes?" he buzzed. And the answer came from a vibrant tongue-bar above the controls.

"There is none such. It is a mistake. Send him to me."

"Through that passage," said the Phalid, passive and dull now that the matter had passed beyond his hands. "*Zau-amuz* will correct your orders."

Wratch could do nothing but obey. There was no possible means of evasion. The passage led to only one place—the chamber of *Zau-amuz*.

Wratch reached a tentacle into the emergency case strapped high up under his carapace, brought forth a small metal object. It was a pity for him to be apprehended now, with his goal so close.

He stepped forth to find *Zau-amuz* regarding him with an intense and interested scrutiny.

"Strange things have been happening aboard," buzzed the Named One. "Earth prisoners escape, leaving behind no clue as to the manner of their going. A brother Phalid wastes much time wandering through the corridors and in the pilot house, watching the stars, when *Bza* requires him to be at his duties around the ship. Another brother—or possibly the same—goes on non-existent orders to study cloud patterns as we approach Mother-world. And these phenomena occur only after a brother is rescued from a vessel of the insect-people, who in this case do not put up their usual frantic resistance, but flee with strange cowardice. Now—" and *Zau-amuz*' tones became sharp and shrill "—these matters point to an inescapable conclusion."

"They do," said Wratch, unconsciously dramatic. "Death!"

He leveled his hand-weapon at the monster Phalid. A blast, a staccato report, the Named One's great head withered and curled to a tiny crisp black ball. Feter and reek filled the chamber.

Zau-amuz slumped over, quivered, was dead.

DOWN the passage ran one of the pilots. He saw the prone body, threw his tall black body into a contorted posture, vented

a scream of such hideous anguish that Wratch's brain sang and hummed. The tale of a thousand horrors, outrage beyond a man's comprehension—massacre, torture, perversion, betrayal of a world's trust—these were trivialities to Wratch's deed.

Wratch promptly killed the pilot. Then he ran back into the blister. He paused on the threshold.

"Boldness, boldness, boldness!" he said to himself. "There must be no backing down now!"

He went slowly into the room, watching the Phalid pilot with desperate intentness, trying to read the hidden brain. He attempted a fantastic deceit.

Every Phalid looked exactly like the next, so far as he knew. At least no physical differentiations were evident to his Earthly perceptions.

He slipped into the stall-rest, so recently occupied by the dead Phalid pilot.

The one yet remaining was concentrated at the controls, and gave Wratch only cursory attention.

"What was the confusion?"

"Zau-amuz gave new directions," said Wratch. "We are to land the ship far out in the wilderness."

The pilot gave a sharp buzz.

"A strange contradiction to his recent orders. Did he specify exactly at what coordinates?"

"He gave us authority to use our own judgment," said Wratch, with the feeling that he was treading on the brink of something unprecedented. "We are merely to select an uninhabited, isolated area and land."

"Strange, strange!" buzzed the pilot. "How many peculiar events in the last few periods! Perhaps we had better check with Zau-amuz."

"No!" said Wratch imperatively. "He is busily engaged at the moment."

The pilot made a few changes in his dials. Wratch, completely ignorant of what his duties consisted, sat back and warily watched the landscape.

"Attention to your work!" barked the pilot suddenly. "Compensate for radial torque!"

"I am ill," said Wratch. "My vision dims. Compensate the torque yourself."

"What manner of fantasy is this?" cried the pilot in wild impatience. "Since when does a Phalid's eyes dim at his duty? It is not *Bea!*"

"Nevertheless, that is how it must be," said

Wratch. "You will have to land the ship alone."

And for lack of an alternative, the pilot, buzzing an undertone of nervous excitement and bewildered indignation, set himself to the task.

The planet grew large. Wratch sat back, and even found it within himself to be amused at the pilot's frantic efforts to do the work of both.

CHAPTER V

Forest of Horrors

INTO view came a city, a beautiful place to Wratch's Phalid eyes, with low domed buildings of a dark glistening substance, a number of pentagon-shaped squares, dark-brown and inset with vast formal mosaics of two shades of sub-red, one tall pylon-shaped tower, terminating in a sphere from which protruded two slender opposing truncated cones, the whole of which slowly revolved against the sallow olive-green sky.

The city crouched over murky and flat-rolling land. A sluggish river ran by at a little distance, and then a marsh, and even though accustomed now to the shades and values of the thirteen Phalid colors, Wratch could not but marvel at the bizarre effects the dim green sun wrought upon the dark landscape.

They passed over the city, and presently over what appeared to be an industrial district. Wratch saw vast flaring pits, gaunt black frameworks on the sky, slag-wastes, cranes startlingly like those of Earth.

The city vanished beyond the horizon. Below was wilderness.

"Land by that high hill," said Wratch. "Close to the edge of the forest."

"I understood that your eyes were dim," said the pilot, not angrily or suspiciously—such emotions seemed foreign to their nature—but merely surprised.

"They see well into the distance," explained Wratch.

"A strange, strange voyage!" buzzed the Phalid.

Bringing the great ship down on an even keel was a racking task for one pilot and Wratch was compelled to admire the deftness with which the Phalid met the problem.

A race at a high level of adaptability, he thought, when the problem was clear before them. Guileless and innocent, almost, when a situation could be met by *Bza*.

The ship sank low toward the soft dark turf, hesitated, grounded, settled its great weight, was quiet.

"Now, the orders of Zau-amuz are that you await his call here, while I go elsewhere," said Wratch.

He stood erect, a tall black creature, horny of body and carapace, with jointed legs, mottled arm-tentacles, a complex insectoid head. But inside the head pulsed an Earthman's brain, and this brain was yelling, "Now! Now! Now!"

Taut with excitement he strode down the passage. He ran to the prison, unbarred the door, beckoned urgently to the woman.

She hesitated, not recognizing him, and he felt her fright. Nevertheless she faced him defiantly. He beckoned more urgently. There was no time to write. He pointed to himself, then to her. She suddenly understood, came running forward. He motioned her to be cautious and took her out into the passageway.

An agonized outcry was heard. The Phalids had found Zau-amuz. Now openly hurrying, Wratch took the girl toward the exit port. The tale of the horrible assassination traveled fast, and each Phalid seemed paralyzed, bereft of reason and will.

The exit port was an intricately-worked device.

"Open the port," said Wratch to two standing nearby. "It was Zau-amuz' last order."

The Phalids dazedly obeyed.

Wratch and the woman tumbled out on the strange sward of the Phalid world. As they did so, from within came the vast droning of the ship's speaker system.

"Terrible treachery! Unthinkable deeds! Capture the two who have left the ship!"

Wratch broke into a shambling run, fumbling meanwhile under his carapace in the emergency case for the pivot of the entire venture. In the case was a device in three parts—a tiny atomic power cell, a rugged, craftily constructed converter, a collapsible transmission grid. Wratch brought these forth as he ran, but time to pause and fit them together was woefully lacking. Already Phalids were streaming from the ship, bounding over the murky sward in ungainly leaps.

The woman was no hindrance. She easily kept pace with the swiftly shambling Phalid

body. It crossed Wratch's mind that she must be young and strong, to run so well. Inconsequently, he wished he could see her as she really was—or that is—as Earthly eyes would see her. To his present eyes she was pallid and moist and reptilian.

THE rocky barren hill was to the left, while ahead and to the right stretched a forest of a vegetation which—though his Phalid eyes found it familiar, intimately, terribly familiar—his Earth brain apprehended as the strangest growth yet seen in its lifetime.

The trees were huge, thick-boled like mushrooms, with fluffy tendriled foliage shaped and textured like giant sea-anemones. They were bright in all the colors of Earth, in the six neighboring Phalid colors, and in every conceivable tone, combination and graduation. The heart-cavity at the top of each glimmered in beautiful kalychrome.

The colors were as clear and bright as sunlight through stained glass, and the forest was as vivid as the light of the wan green sun would allow. It seemed specially gorgeous beside the dark rolling hills and the dank green swamps covered with low rushes. And though the trees, if trees they were, were angrily beautiful, the trunks and limbs had a perturbingly plump and meaty look.

Wratch needed only three minutes to do what was necessary, and the forest seemed to be the only sanctuary, the sole possibility for a moment's concealment.

Wratch fleetingly wondered about the dampening familiarity of the forest. Was it a suggestion, an aura of the Phalids themselves? Yet how could it be? Wratch's long wobbly strides faltered a moment. The forest was ahead and the Phalids were behind, so the forest was the lesser of two menaces.

He looked about desperately, but no other retreat was visible, and he drove his shambling body hard for the purple-shadowed aisles. Suddenly he found it was his Phalid body, not his brain, that feared the colored forest. Each cell tingled with a deep-grained fear, an instinct that thrilled the fibers of his great black body. The gay streamered growths seemed grotesque monsters, the dark shaded depths forbidding as death itself.

A bolt from a Phalid weapon blasted past his head. The forest was at hand. Wratch did not hesitate. Every nerve quivering, he plunged within.

He ran and ran, changing course to confuse the pursuers. The girl was becoming tired, and her steps were obviously lagging. Wratch looked behind, saw nothing but the thick boles, a hundred fantastic colors.

It was a forest of death. He saw several dull husks of long dead Phalids, black dry carapaces like wing-cases discarded by gigantic beetles, and with a shock of horror he saw a human skeleton, white, forlorn and inexpressibly lost looking in this alien jungle.

Presently he stopped, listened, every hearing-hair tense in the sounding chamber under his carapace.

Silence. No crashing steps. Had they shaken off pursuit?

The dread felt by his body slowly began to invest Wratch's brain. He looked high, looked low, saw nothing but slowly stirring foliage, thick boles, red, green, yellow, orange, blue, the seven Phalid colors, the infinite combinations. Nevertheless Wratch seemed to feel intelligence near, seemed to hear malevolent voices talking above his head, gloating in a frightening anticipation.

Sprouting from the bole of a nearby tree he saw a clump of the delicious grape-things he had eaten aboard the ship. He was tired, he needed refreshment. He almost reached to pluck them but, he thought, he had no time for food. Or perhaps some instinct had warned him? He drew back his arm-tentacle, turned away. His first concern was to assemble the signal transmitter.

He laid the parts on the dank ground, set to work. Overhead three Phalid air-boats whistled down the green-brown sky, searching, thought Wratch, for the two who had fled the ship. He noticed the spongy foliage above. Had it settled closer, lower than before? The thought sent sympathetic spasms through his body.

Resolutely he ignored the reflex terror, fitted the three pieces of equipment into the device whose successful functioning was being awaited by a planet.

He was almost finished. Tighten the connection, throw the switch, fling a gush of permorad sweeping out into space to mesh, inside of five minutes, a hundred relays in as many ships of Earth's space-navy.

BUT Ryan Wratch was interrupted. He heard a shrill grinding scream. He whirled, saw the girl fighting three or four glistening stalks which had sprouted from the ground. They were brittle shoots, fan-

tastically mobile, that sought to grow around her, twine her close.

Wratch felt a cool smooth thing fumbling at his back. At the touch his shiny black body went limp, relaxed to a flood of singing peace. It was merged with the eternal, immersed in a blissful consummation of life.

Wratch's Earth brain protested, struggled in frantic alarm, sent commands down unwilling nerves. He kicked out and his lax limbs snapped the brittle stalk. Some measure of aliveness returned to his body. He ran over and tore at the root-things that pressed in at the girl. One coiled around her knee. She screamed again and her agony smote Wratch's brain.

He stamped, beat, crushed—drew the girl aside. Blood was seeping from her knee. She shuddered, pressed close against him, and Wratch felt a throat-catching relief in her brain, to be free, to be beside him. And Wratch, strangely at this time remembering Miss Elder's disgust and nausea, was greatly surprised, also a little embarrassed.

All this occurred in the three seconds it took Wratch to bring out his power-blast and lay a smoking waste around them. Now, so he thought, he knew why the Phalids had relinquished the chase at the forest's verge, why his Phalid instincts had cried out at the thought of the strange-hued aisles. Apparently the forest was a place accursed. Apparently the Phalids trusted the forest to perform their executions.

The roots came again, this time strangely hesitant, as if directed by a vast injured intelligence. A great buzzing voice sounded out of the foliage overhead. Wratch jumped around, held his gun ready.

"Brother, little brother, are you abnormal of mind?" said the voice in gentle, surprised tones. "You burn the arms that fold you to eternity? Did not *Bza* bring you to the Father?"

Wratch looked all about for the Phalid who spoke, saw no one.

"No," he spoke, "I came for another reason. Come out, wherever you are, or I burn down every tree in sight."

A pause. Wratch felt an intelligence, a monstrous alien intelligence, touch his brain. It recoiled.

"Ah, small wonder you kill the arms of the Father. Your body is that of the children, your brain a hideous thing, a guileful vacillating power, and you know nothing of *Bza*."

"True," said Wratch, holding his weapon

poised. "I am of the planet Earth who those of this planet have attacked. Who are you? Where are you?"

"I am all about you," said the voice. "I am the forest—the Father."

For a moment Wratch's brain was staggered. Then he regained his mental balance. Very interesting, but time was wasting. He backed slowly to where he had dropped the transmitter.

It was gone.

CHAPTER VI

Signal of Desperation

RIGID with anxiety, Wratch whirled around. He saw the transmitter high overhead, fast in one of the coiling white shoots.

"Drop that," he buzzed urgently. "Drop that, I say!"

"Calmness, brother, calmness and quiet in the Father-forest. That is *Bza*."

Wratc h beat at the base of the stalk. It snapped, toppled. In an instant he had torn the transmitter free. A stalk quickly wound around him from behind and pinned him. The transmitter dropped. Another stalk came and Wratch was helpless. The girl ran over, tore at the stalk, but it was tougher than the first one had been, and sheathed with a leathery pliable skin.

Wratc h buzzed frantically at her. If only she could talk, if only she could understand!

He kicked the transmitter into an open space, kicked her after it.

"Zz—zz—zz—zz!" he said peremptorily, urgently. Why couldn't she understand?

She slowly stood erect, looked at Wratch doubtfully, then looked at the transmitter. She picked it up.

"Is this what you want?"

"Zz—zz—zz!" buzzed Wratch.

"Once for no, twice for yes," she said, dodging back from a creeping white arm. "Do you want me to do something with it?"

"Zz! Zz!" and Wratch tried to nod his stiff neck.

She put her hand on the switch. "Turn this?"

"Zz! Zz!"

She snapped it. It hummed, sang, vibrated. The grid grew white, swam with a hundred colors, and threw a tremendous signal out

through all subspace, a beacon summoning all Earth's warships to the Father-forest, to the planet of the Phalids. In five minutes every alarm panel in the space-navy would respond to crazy ringing. A hundred vectors would be plotted, and where they converged, so would converge a hundred tremendous armored vessels.

Ryan Wratch relaxed. They could kill him now. His mission was done. He had kept faith with the memory of his brothers. And the Father-forest was going to kill him. He knew it, felt the certainty of his death and the almost benign motive behind it. The white shoots tightened, began to send out eager exploring little tendrils to probe through the cracks and chinks in his chitin.

Wratc h looked at the girl. He felt her fear. It was not fear for herself! It was fear and wild pity for him!

Ryan Wratch wanted to live.

"Release me!" he called to the forest. "I will talk with you!"

"Why should you seek to evade *Bza*?" asked the gentle voice. "Your brain is an alien thing. If we obey, you may burn some more of the little white arms."

"Not unless they seek to fasten on me again. Release me! If you don't I will tell my companion to burn a great circle through the forest."

The arms suddenly loosened.

Wratc h stepped clear. The girl ran over to him, stopped short, a little at a loss. Wratch stroked her shoulder with an arm-member.

He looked carefully around for any stealthy white roots, but there were none. He detected a great sense of watchful caution in the forest, but also a slow withdrawal of its menace.

He looked back down at the girl, feeling strangely protective.

He wrote on the turf. "Thanks. We've won!"

"But won't the Phalids come for us and kill us?" asked the girl.

"Phalids are afraid of the forest. Maybe we can hold out till Earth ships come," wrote Wratch in the dark loam. And he felt a hope, a warm happiness in her brain.

"Will we ever get back to Earth?"

Something stiffened inside him. Like a spray of icy water were his quick thoughts. Dreariness grayed over and dimmed his brain. Earth? What was there for him on Earth? His body was dead. His brain, grafted into another body, would die. He had not expected, no one had expected him, to survive

his mission.

"I don't know," he wrote.

THEN he glanced, at the grid, still screaming its message through the sub-ether and his dejection was tempered with a grim satisfaction of a desperate job completed.

Again he looked all around. There was no sign of life, just the sense of the brooding, watching forest, half-petulant, half-savage.

An intuition of the tremendous truth came to him. In sudden curiosity he buzzed the Phalid attention signal loud into the air.

"What is your wish?" came the answer from high up in the many-colored foliage.

"Tell me in what way the forest is the Father."

"From the forest comes the Fruit of Life," said the voice. "He who eats it is impregnate with a second life, presently brings to the light of the green sun another of the Children."

Faintness. Nausea. Wratch shuddered. He remembered his avid eating of the fruit aboard the Phalid ship.

* * * * *

Wratch sprawled his shiny black body awkwardly in the saloon of the fleet flagship—the *Canadian Might*. Earth furniture would not fit his gaunt frame. Even the special chair built for him in the ship's machine shop was not entirely comfortable.

Beside him sat the girl of the Phalid ship. Wratch had found that her name was Constance Averill. Commander Sandion had just left the saloon for his office on the bridge deck, and except for Constance Averill, who sat quietly in a soft chair nearby, the room was empty.

It was a magnificent room. The walls were dressed leather, carved and embossed with black, red and smoky blue. Long ports, more like windows than ports, opened out on the black vistas of space with stars gleaming down from on high, other stars gleaming up from below.

On the other walls hung splashy water-colors painted by an artistic second officer—a view of the Olympic Mountains of Coralangan, from the Songink Desert; natives of Bao mashing up water-leech pulp; a Martian landscape, the ruins of Amth-Mogot.

The furniture was soft green and brick-red, the lights were amber. There were many book-racks and books, a television-cinema combination set.

Wratch sighed inwardly, mentally. His

body, actually, could not sigh. Air pumped itself through a thousand conduits inside his shell as automatically as a human heart beats.

Wratch looked all around the room without moving his head. Such was the virtue of his optic slit and two hundred eyes. He knew it was pleasant, knew that Earthmen had planned this room to be warm and livable, out here in the cold black void. But to Wratch it was stark, barren, and unfamiliar.

Earth lay a week's flight ahead. Two weeks astern, insignificant in Lyra, hung the dark and murky planet of the Phalids, occupied now by an Earth garrison, guarded by two impregnable Earth forts sweeping an orbit a thousand miles above the equator.

The door opened. The Staff Anthropologist entered, sat down, pulled at his trousers, began to speak fussily. He was a harmless little man with a high bald dome, a gingery mustache, quick brown eyes.

Two weeks now he had been bothering Wratch night and day with questions. Wratch, who was absorbed in his own dark thoughts, cared little for the talk of anyone. Except Constance Averill, and she spoke very little of anything now.

"From what you've told me," said the Anthropologist, "and what observations I was able to make personally, I've arrived at a tentative theory. It implies a peculiar set of conditions, to our notion, but probably no stranger than the analogous circumstances would appear to the Phalids.

"They are a split race. Instead of differentiation between male and female, they differentiate, roughly, plant and animal. The fruit of the plant fertilizes the animal. The animal, driven by its hunger for the fruit, or perhaps 'Bza', comes to steal the fruit. The plant traps it, consumes it, and is thus stimulated to produce more fruit."

The anthropologist regarded them in wise triumph.

"And the plan was to train Earthmen to steal the fruit?" asked Constance Averill.

"Apparently the stimulatory substance is present in human bodies as well as in Phalid," said the anthropologist. "The Phalid ruling clan, the Named Ones, had become worried by the declining of the Phalid population. The rulers had reached a high technological level. They decided to explore space to find some sort of creature who could serve as proxy for the Phalids in such dangerous pilgrimages to the Father-forest.

"So at last they encountered Earthmen in

space, took a few experimental prisoners who, properly treated psychologically, proved almost ideal for the job. They were just getting ready to start large-scale plans to import Earthmen, and have them steal the fruit from the forest and bring it to the city. And if the Earth people were trapped in the Father-forest, well, there was no harm done. It would result in just so much more fruit."

ONE of the anthropologist's assistants entered, leaned deferentially over the anthropologist. "Details of the treaty have just arrived over the permophone."

"Yes?" The anthropologist sat up, blinked. "What are the terms?"

"The Phalids pay an indemnity—a hundred million munits worth of ores and singular goods. We establish a laboratory, ship out a corps of research scientists, identify the substance that stimulates fruit from the trees. We contract to arrange for a stated tonnage of the fruit per year. In other words we farm the forest."

The anthropologist was plainly interested and rather pleased. "I wonder, what social effect the treaty will have on the Phalids?" he said. "What will become of their *Bza*, their homogeneity, their culture patterns? Excuse me," he said to Wratch and Constance Averill. "I really must apply McDougall's Theorems to the situation."

He trotted away. Wratch and Constance Averill were alone.

Wratch looked wearily around the room with his two hundred eyes. It was low, ill-proportioned; the colors were harsh and discordant. The men of the crew, the anthropologists, Constance Averill—they were ugly alien things. Their voices rasped his ear-hairs, their movements offended his Phalid sense of esthetics.

He became aware of Constance Averill's flow of thoughts. The resolution and stubborn vitality he had first noted and admired in her had lapsed far out of his perception, below the general tenor of her mind, and instead there was warmth and eagerness and good humor. And a strange wistfulness too.

It was now she was wistful and oddly timid.

"You're not happy, are you?" she said.

He wrote: "I was able to pull the job off. I'm glad of that. Beyond that—I'm a museum piece. A freak."

"Don't say that!" Wratch sensed an immense pity. "You're the bravest man in the world!"

"I'm no man. My body is dead. I can't get into another human body. I'm stuck. I don't like it especially. Nothing looks right or human through these Phalid eyes."

"What do I look like?" she asked with interest.

"Awful. Half-lizard, half-witch-doctor."

Wratch felt her brain quirk in quick feminine alarm.

"I'm really not bad-looking," she assured him.

There was a pause.

"You need someone to look after you," she said. "And I'm going to do it."

Wratch was genuinely surprised. His finger-flaps twitched as he wrote:

"No! I'm going to get a space-boat and live out in space the rest of my life. I don't need anyone."

"I'll come too."

"You can't. What of your reputation?"

"Oh, I think I'm safe with you," and she laughed. "Anyway I don't care."

"Legally," wrote Wratch with sardonic emphasis, "I'm a woman. I've eaten the Fruit of Life. Eventually this body will become a mother. I hope I don't develop a maternal instinct."

She stood up. She was crying.

"Don't! Don't talk like that! It's horrible—what they've done to you!" She wiped her eyes furiously with her hand.

"All right!" she said angrily. "I'm crazy. I'm insane. Well, it's leap year. I think you're the most wonderful man I know. I love you. I don't care what you look like. I love what makes you tick, inside. So you've got me—and I'm going to make sure that I—"

Wratch sagged back in the chair.

The ship's third officer entered.

"A message for you, Mr. Wratch. Just arrived over the permophone."

Wratch opened the envelope. The note read:

Dear Mr. Wratch: Good news for you—and you deserve it. We've got your body patched up and waiting for you. It was a hard fight. We grafted a new liver, eighteen feet of small intestine, a new left leg from the knee down.

I didn't tell you before because I didn't want to raise false hopes—and it's been touch and go. As soon as the brain left the body, the best doctors and surgeons in the world worked night and day on it.

I know you'll be feeling more cheerful now and I'll be seeing you within a week.

Wratch handed the permogram to Constance Averill.

(Concluded on page 94)



The eyes of the nurse in the white uniform widened at sight of the gun

PARDON MY MISTAKE

By FLETCHER PRATT

A kidnaper of the future runs into some curious difficulties when he tries to make the first getaway in a fast space ship!

AS HE slipped past the chute of Pit 3, Bob Waring could see through the steel spider-web of Pit 4 to the porch where everyone was having a final cocktail and a final dance before going to the Q-room for the injections which would cushion them against the frightful shock of a rocket take-off.

The windows were open to the summer night. Over the muted golden notes of the clarinet Alida's laughter rang high, and a trifle too sharp. She had taken one cocktail too many, as she usually did when excited. Waring remembered how she had done that at their engagement party—Arrh! And now she was drinking one cocktail too many because she was off with Hugh Frazer on a honeymoon, really to the mountains of the moon.

He could make her out clearly through the steel tracery, wearing that same sea-blue dress she had had on the day she told him:

"It's no use, Bob, not any more. I wouldn't

mind being poor with you, even if you turned out to be a financial failure every time. I wouldn't mind—oh, lots of things. But I just couldn't take a chance on my own life, knowing every day that you might find another opportunity you couldn't pass up, and—"

"But I put the money back. They never found out."

"I found out, Bob. I'm not talking about other people."

That was all she would say at the time, and now Hugh Frazer's arm was around the sea-blue dress and they were dancing. She was letting Hugh lead. Bob Waring remembered that when she had danced with him, she had always taken the lead herself. He leaned a trifle forward, stumbled, and his foot caught a cinder to knock it clicking down the long pit, scarred by rocket blasts. A footstep sounded behind him.

"Who's there?" came the hard voice of the sentry.

Waring ducked and ran, bent double, his

sneakered feet pushing the cinders. Left—he dodged behind a charge-box.

"Stop or I shoot!" came the warning voice.

Right—Waring slipped into the passage between a pair of tool-sheds, around behind one of them, and the scene was lighted by the electric-blue brilliance of a flash pistol. There was a fence straight ahead, fortunately a low one. In one plunge he was over.

The sentry's whistle sounded behind. Waring ran blindly along the fence, bent double, encountered a pile of rocket-charge cylinders, was around it, under a piece of hull-form and against another.

IT WAS an interior form, as his hands assured him. He heard the steps pad behind, the sentry's whistle and then the plunk as he vaulted the fence. Waring remembered that the last place a searcher looks is just over his head, and gripping the rungs of the ladder on the section of hull-form, climbed.

"What's up?" said a new voice, so near his hiding place he almost let go.

"Somebody, I think," said the voice of the first sentry. "Mebbe one of Nat Reardon's crowd."

"You and your big ideas. Probably just some poor dopey trying to chisel himself enough scopodiadine for a pipe-dream. If Reardon was after that dough on the Honey-moon Express, boy, you'd know it. He wouldn't be hiding out, he'd be after this place with everything in the book. Listen!"

The voices and crunching feet moved away, as Waring flattened himself against the hull section. About ten feet above the ground, he discovered as soon as he dared move, the rungs led to a port. Waring wriggled his way in and lay in the open air-lock of the section, panting and feeling around his waist to make sure that the sharp edge of the fence had not broken his precious package.

For a few moments he lay there, rehearsing once more every detail of the plan. Everything had to be perfect—but it was. He had worked too long in the office at the rocket port not to have a thorough knowledge of the procedure.

Presently the lights on the terrace would go out, the passengers would file into the room where they received their scopodiadine injections, and from there would be taken aboard. Passengers to the right, crew to the left. Then would come the wait while the injections took effect, with all employees

cleared from the rocket area, down in the steel-lined chambers below ground.

That was the moment. He would have perhaps as much as ten minutes before the remote controls were closed and the rocket dismissed into the ultimate depths of space with its earth-shaking roar.

The starboard rear life-car. He would have to hurry to make it and get the injection into himself. But old Holtzmann was in the control room tonight. Old Holtzmann never took chances on sending a rocket away before all the passengers were surely under the scopodiadine. He would wait a good fifteen minutes instead of the legal ten before closing the circuit that automatically shut the air-locks and discharged the booster rockets.

Waring lifted his head and looked from his hiding place across the rocket port. As he did, the terrace lights died and the place was illuminated only by the distance shine from the tip of the tower, all of two miles distant. He would have to hurry now, and in the dark, but thank goodness, the sentries would be out of there.

The cinders crunched under his feet. Let's see—had he made two turns around that pile of charge cylinders or only one? He felt the shape of them under his hand. Now the fence. Over it, to the left again—and the eye of the tower was blotted out by the immense form of a space rocket looming between him and the stars.

Waring felt his way to the chute, down it to where the big door stood open, flush with the ground. Passengers to the right—this was where the corridor divided. All dark, since even the Kozymanski lights could not stand the strain of a takeoff and would not be hooked in till they were beyond the stratosphere.

Twelve steps down the corridor, exactly twelve steps, as he knew from counting them so many times on other rockets, he found where he expected it to be, the handle of the life-car lock. Down and to the right—open. He slipped in, closing in carefully to cushion the clang, though probably by this time passengers and crew alike were deep under scopodiadine and could not possibly hear.

With the door open, he used his flash briefly. Standard life-car, correct, with two passenger seats, and miniature drive at the rear. Quite sufficient to take two people through 90,000 miles of space. He let himself in and pulled out the injection kit, a smile playing

around his face.

The operation was already a success. The two people who would use that life-car were already chosen—Bob Waring and Alida Burnett. Not Hugh Frazer. He would drift forever with the wrecked ship around the sun, a new planetoid.

IH, WELL, that is, she could have her choice. If she wanted to stay aboard with Hugh, be part of that planetoid with him, let her. He, Bob Waring, would start life over in a world without either of them.

But he had no doubt which Alida would choose. Back on Terra, Hugh Frazer might be a big shot and the boss of a lot of things while he, Bob Waring, was just a punk who had tried to get away with something and missed. But out in the space lanes he would have the only flash pistol aboard, and the booster bomb that would convert the ships whole supply of atomic fuel to energy in one terrific explosion, like the inside of a star.

With a smile of self-satisfaction, Waring plunged the needle into his arm and lay back. Consciousness was not quite blotted out when the shock of the start came, tearing at his heart and lungs, but the sensation was smothered in the mounting effect of the injection. . . .

Waring threw back the cover of the life-car. Through the permalux window he could make out, so far beneath that the identity of

the continents was blurred, the spinning blue ball of earth. Off at one side was the black sky with another planet among the stars, and the big ship was vibrating gently with the discharge of her driving rockets. The crew were on duty and directing her. He must have overslept, and they were already a long way out.

Hastily he adjusted the calculating telescope on the car—86,000 miles to Terra. He would have to work fast.

Waring felt for his flash pistol, leaped from the life-car and flung open the door. Nobody in the corridor. Good. He stepped along it to the first cabin on the left, No. 58. That would be Alida's he knew from the passenger list.

Knock, knock. No answer. She must still be partly under the injection.

Waring gripped the door handle and turned. It opened to show a nurse in a white uniform bending over something that looked like a child's bed. She exhibited a startled face, her eyes widening at the sight of the pistol.

"Oh!" she cried. "What do you want?"

"I want Miss Alida Burnett. Isn't this her cabin?" And then, as a dreadful thought struck him, "Isn't this the Honeymoon Express for the moon?"

"Of course not. This is the educational ship *Montessori* on an eight years' tour of the planets with orphan children."

PHALID'S FATE

(Concluded from page 91)

When he looked back, she was crying again. The two hundred Phalid eyes would not cry.

* * * * *

IT WAS the waiting room of the Atlantic-Space Combine Hospital. Half a hundred people sat in the lobby, waiting for friends and relatives discharged from the wards in the tower above. These came by the elevator load; five or ten at a time, for the Combine was the largest hospital in the world.

A slender girl with lustrous dark red hair, a face delicate and lovely as a flower form, but with a clear and sure underlying strength, sat in the waiting room. She was watching the elevator, intently eyeing the men—especially the young sunburned men—as they emerged and came to seek familiar faces in the waiting room. Once or twice she looked closely, then relaxed in her seat.

The minutes passed. Down came the ele-

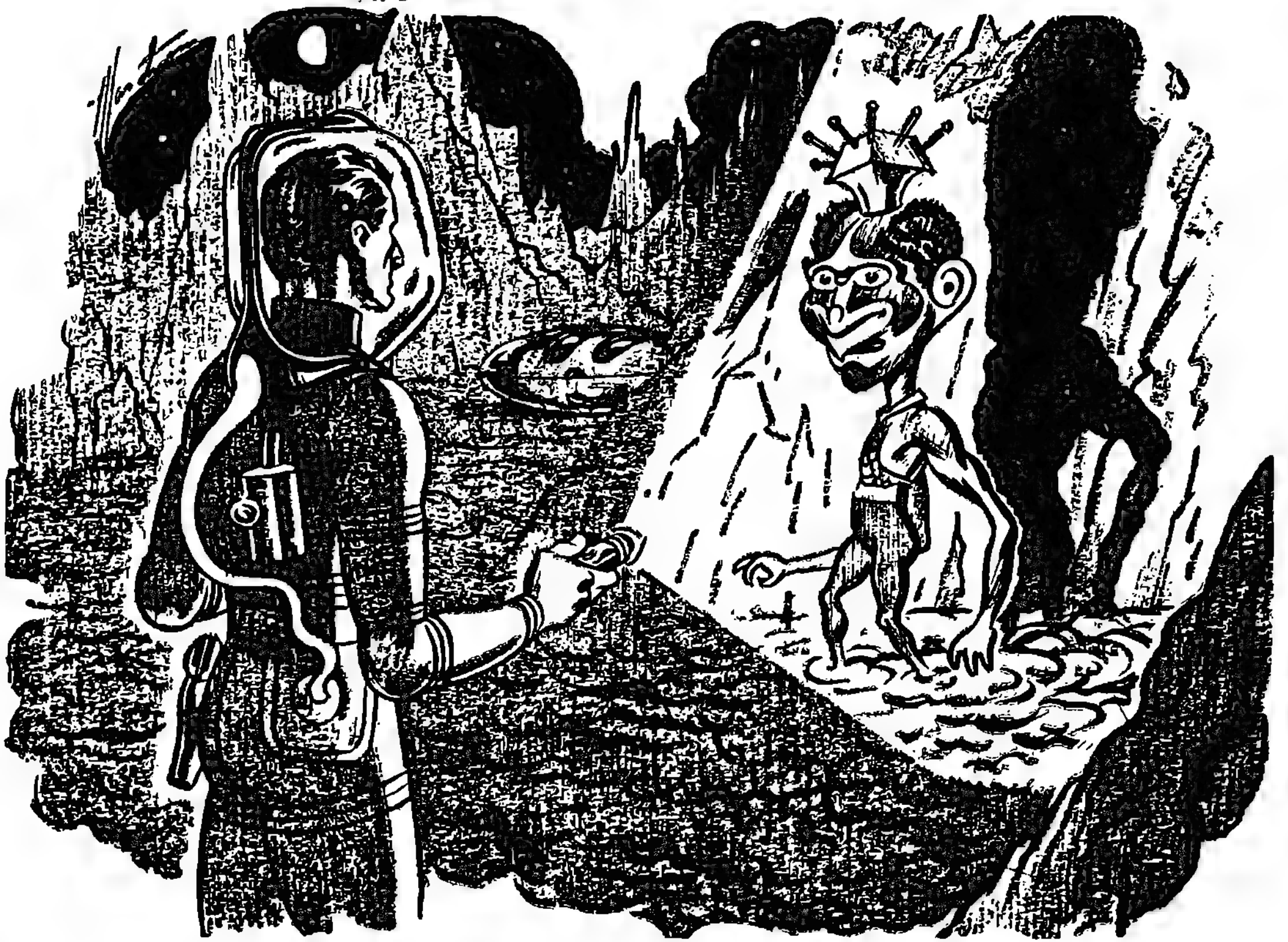
vator once more. The door slid back, the discharged patients stepped out.

One of these was a young man, rather thin but well-muscled. He had a wide good-humored mouth, a long chin with a scar running up his cheek, a skin burnt almost as dark as his hair—space-tan that won't come off.

The girl looked—looked again—slowly stood up, took a few hesitant steps forward. The young man had paused, was looking through the crowd. She stood still. Would there be someone? Was she mistaken? No, she couldn't be wrong. She stepped forward. He saw her, looked at her. Suddenly he smiled, reached out, took both of her hands.

"Constance." It was a declaration, no question. For almost a minute they stared at each other—remembering.

He held her arm very close as they left the hospital.



Then suddenly Jay Revere saw, in the rays of the flashlight, a creature peculiarly like a man

LIFE ON THE MOON

By ALEXANDER SAMALMAN

Jay Revere explores the unknown in the first rocket trip to the surface of Earth's mysterious, curious satellite!

FIRST the news was whispered in high official circles, very hush-hush and mysterious. Then it became a rumor, a rumor that spread into seas of exaggeration, a rumor that brought hysterics, fright and exaltation in its wake, according to the natures of its auditors. When the news could no longer be kept confidential—there really wasn't any reason for concealing it in the first place—it appeared in cold, dispassionate print in the more dignified newspapers and in screaming headlines in the lurid press.

At the same time the full battery of radio commentators went to work on the story,

with their extraordinary range of treatment, from dry and monotonous monologue to dramatic, flamboyant oratory. And so the story became public property, and was discussed in subways and offices, in homes and at clubs, in forest and factory.

There was life on the Moon!

"The possibility of life-forms on the Moon," wrote Professor Arnold Karlton in a special syndicated feature that girdled the globe, "has always been denied by our leading scientists. And yet now we have proof, incontrovertible proof, backed up by tangible evidence, that such life does exist.

"It makes one wonder how many curious misconceptions of the Universe have been carefully nurtured and promulgated by science in the past, and reminds us of the necessity of revising all our preconceived notions. For this is a new age of science, the age of the atom, of radar, of space-flight, and it is also an age of skepticism, an age that refuses to be bound by the obsolete findings of years ago—"

* * * * *

It all began with the direction of the radar beam to the Moon and its successful contact with that satellite. Then, as everyone knows, the radar map of the Moon was made—and after that, the empty rocket ship, guided from a laboratory on Earth, circled the Moon and returned to Earth, but brought back no evidence of its strange journey.

It all would have ended there, for a while at least, if it were not that in the small town of Riverport there lived a man, an accountant named Jay Revere to be exact, who rather fancied himself as a space pioneer and inserted an advertisement in his local paper to the effect that he would gladly offer his services to science by risking the perilous journey to the Moon in an Earth-guided rocket ship. He would, if he remained alive, be happy to give a full account of his experiences without any other compensation than the awareness of his own service to humanity.

After a great deal of pro and con discussion as to the ethics of the case, a conclave of noted scientists voted to give Jay Revere the privilege of being the first man to make a journey to the Moon.

And so, on a sunny day in May, 1950, meek little accountant Jay Revere, who had never before been more than five miles out of Riverport in his life, climbed into a rocket ship at La Guardia Field and made himself as comfortable as he could in the small cramped space the craft afforded. The doors were shut tight, and Jay Revere was suddenly more alone than any other man in the world, seeing nothing but the blank metal walls around him and hearing no sound.

Because the scientists did not want to make a public spectacle of the event, there were very few persons on the field and of those only a handful knew what was taking place. They stood about, watching the strange experiment with a curious mixture of surprise, excitement, curiosity and awe.

"Here she goes!" shouted a mechanic and the field became a hive of activity.

All those connected with the flight took their posts in the elaborate control-rooms from which the ship was to be steered, observed, and landed on the Moon, and brought back again upon the signal of Jay Revere. There was a two-way radar arrangement so that a limited amount of communication could be carried on.

This communication, however, could not take the form of words, because the rocket-ship would be out of radio range in a remarkably short time—all the signals could tell Revere was that he was still under observation, and all he could convey was the simple fact that he was still alive.

THERE was a great sputtering noise, and sparks and flames issued from the rocket ship as it abruptly bounded from the surface of the Earth. Inside, Jay Revere, who already felt like a prisoner in solitary confinement, knew none of this. He did not even feel a jolt as the rocket ship started. It was so thoroughly soundproofed and insulated against shock, and supplied with a complete air system of its own, that Revere was literally out of the world.

He squirmed about a bit, and finally settled down to as much composure as he could summon. When the ship was a hundred thousand miles out in space, he wondered:

"Why don't they start? I wonder what's delaying them."

It was really most irritating. Might as well start and get it over with and see what happens! To some degree he regretted his rash offer, and became hot and cold by turns as he contemplated the fearsome possibilities of the unknown.

Jay Revere was being hurtled through space at the rate of seven miles per second, but he did not know he was in motion. His isolation was complete, and he could not tell he was moving because he saw nothing that moved about him. Time, too, had ceased to exist, save that on numerous occasions he became very hungry or thirsty, and he helped himself to the concentrated pill rations with which he had been supplied.

To do this was an elaborate process, as he did not have much freedom of movement, and getting his hand into his pocket and then into his mouth required a series of shiftings and squirmings that would have appeared to an observer like the gyrations of a man gone berserk.

Suddenly the rocket ship landed, and Jay

Revere would not have known it were it not that the door of the rocket ship abruptly opened, a happening which was prearranged to synchronize with the landing of the craft.

Revere's first emotion was of relief as he squirmed out of his uncomfortable position. Then the relief gave way to fear, which he finally conquered, and now he had a great urge for caution. Gingerly he stepped out of the rocket ship, put one foot down experimentally, then the other.

He was ankle-deep in slimy, thick mud utterly different from any mud he had ever seen in Riverport. It was a rich purple color, with greenish veins in it, and it had a glue-like stickiness that was most repellent. The air was thin and unpleasant. It was hot, hot with a ferocity unknown on Earth. The Sun seemed to be right on top of him, aiming at him as though he were a target for immolation.

There was no vegetation, no sign of life about him. It was easy enough for Jay Revere to determine, with his smattering of scientific knowledge, that he was indeed on the Moon. It was just as it had been described by learned savants who had long, long before pieced together all the available clues to form a picture of the Moon's surface. As he stood there on this alien soil, all Jay Revere's fears, all his caution, all his doubts of his wisdom in attempting the journey, vanished, and gave way to a feeling of pride and exultation.

"I have done it!" he exclaimed aloud. "I am the first human of Earth to visit the Moon! I am here! No man before me has put a foot on this ground! Should this mean my death, it would have been well worth while."

The mud below, the broiling sun above, all lost their terror for him. As one inspired, he struggled through the mud, his eyes gazing into the future. He became impervious to physical discomfort, and felt that he was the greatest, the biggest, the most wonderful thing alive in all the Universe.

Jay Revere glanced this way and that, and only barrenness met his eyes.

"The scientists have been right about the Moon all along," he muttered. "I shall have to start back soon, and tell them all about it. I was warned not to venture far from the rocket ship on this first journey, for I might be lost and swallowed up, and no man would know what became of me. But it seems to me that the scientists were correct in pic-

turing the Moon as barren and lifeless, and I shall tell them so. They shall be proud of their perspicacity, but perhaps a little disappointed too, as I am."

Suddenly Jay Revere's reverie was broken up as he heard a slight rustling in the distance. And now cold fear and apprehension clutched his heart. What was that? Could anything be moving? Could anything be—alive? Could there be anything here—man or bird or beast?

Jay Revere became wary, watchful. In the midst of his excitement, he grinned as he thought how akin his sensations were to those he had felt when as a boy he had gone hunting in the forests surrounding Riverport.

He was on the hunt now, too, for truly big game. But would he live to tell the story? If anything lived on the Moon, would it allow him to live?

JAY REVERE did not hear the rustling again, but he stood rooted to the spot, his features pointing, like those of a hunting dog, toward the direction of the strange sound. And as he stood there, the sun's rays grew kinder, and the light became dim, and he drew from his pocket a tiny flashlight with which he had been provided, and he swung it around him in an arc.

And then suddenly he saw it! There, running past him, was a creature peculiarly like a man—and yet not like a man.

For a moment the creature was so close he could have touched it, but he was too spell-bound and frightened to make a move.

The creature had a large head, and a tiny body, and long, apelike arms, and looked ferocious. And it was dressed in a garment that closely resembled armor, and upon the large head there was a strange box-like hat from which many little horns protruded.

For several moments all time stood still, and then Jay Revere recovered his wits and his courage. He was, he knew, on the verge of a tremendous, earth-shaking discovery.

"Hey, there!" he shouted. "Come back here!"

The words sounded strange in Jay Revere's ears, and they were indeed strange words to use to this Moon-creature, but they had issued from him of their own accord. However, his quarry certainly did not understand and in any case did not want to obey, and disappeared in the distance.

Jay Revere had a difficult time getting his feet out of the glue-like mud after having

stayed in one spot so long, and found it impossible to pursue his quarry. And he discovered he was tired, weary, on the brink of collapse.

"I have some information, anyway," he thought, "and the rest will have to wait for another trip. I'm going home."

Ah, how wonderful Riverport seemed to Jay Revere now. He was filled with an irresistible homing impulse. He didn't belong here on the Moon. The exultation was gone. It was getting damp, uncomfortable here. He'd go home. He'd gird himself for the long return journey and go home.

Jay Revere trudged through the mud toward the rocket ship, tiredness eating into his body, when suddenly he saw something in the mud, something that gleamed with a strange light.

He bent down to pick it up, and realized that he now held in his hand the hat which the strange creature had worn, which it had dropped in its headlong flight from him.

"Can it be it was afraid of me?" wondered Jay Revere.

He crammed the hat into a corner of the rocket ship, smiling with satisfaction at the thought of the wonderful souvenir he would bring back and how it would prove everything he had to report. Then with a sigh the little accountant squeezed himself into the rocket ship, banged the door, sent out a radar signal to the effect that he was ready for the guided return flight, and settled down as comfortably as he could.

The return journey was as devoid of sensation as the journey from Earth. It was even less eventful, if that were possible. For Jay Revere, thoroughly exhausted, slept by fits and starts all the way back. He landed in La Guardia Field and was allowed to rest and replenish himself, and then he stood before a conclave of scientists and told them the strange story of his exploit and showed them the hat he had brought back as a souvenir.

Needless to say, Jay Revere's revelations caused much shaking of heads, gasps of incredulity, cries of amazement. The hat was finally taken as positive evidence of life on the Moon. And Jay Revere's ride became a

world-shaking event that found its way into the press and into the everyday conversation of people the world over who now knew there was life on the Moon. Knew it beyond the shadow of a doubt.

As for Jay Revere himself, he became the man of the hour, feted and praised everywhere for his courage. A pioneer of science, they called him, and men spoke his name in admiration and awe.

* * * * *

At the very moment that Jay Revere was holding forth before the conclave of Earth scientists about his amazing journey, another such conclave was taking place far, far from Earth. Millions of miles away, on the Fiery Planet Mars, a conference of men of learning was being addressed by a young Martian.

"I made a good landing with the ship," the young Martian was saying. "And then I looked around a bit. I saw nothing, nothing but mud and more mud—and suddenly I heard the strange sound of another being, and there was a flash of light from some terrible weapon. A long, thin creature with a small head, dressed in some fabric the like of which I have never seen, suddenly lunged forward at me. His eyes were wild with killer lust.

"I should have liked to communicate with him, but he shouted a strange threat at me in some odd gibberish of a language, and I felt that discretion was the better part of valor. Had I remained to parley, gentlemen, I am sure he would have destroyed me. I fled, losing my gravity-cap as I ran.

"I can only conclude, gentlemen, that as we have long suspected, there is life on the Moon of Earth—but it is wild, undeveloped life, vicious in the greatest degree, and in future trips we shall have to learn how to deal with the strange type of creature who has his being there. That is all, gentlemen."

Needless to say, these revelations brought much shaking of heads, gasps of incredulity, cries of amazement. And the young Martian's adventure was spoken of in every corner of the Planet Mars, and it was known to all Martians that there was life on Earth's curious satellite, the Moon.



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THE READER SPEAKS

(Continued from page 8)

regulated fates, and the young man in this case is Riley Ashton, who refuses to sit back and let nature take its course. This is a story which promotes thought and chuckles along with a full dose of suspense.

In support of these two longer stories, we have assembled a representative group of short yarns which should satisfy both the dead-set-for-science boys and girls among you and the fantasy-or-nothing folk. And also present will be as usual THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY and this department, complete with Sarge Saturn. May it be the issue you've been so patiently awaiting according to your letters—or is patiently exactly the word?

Let's look at the letters and see.

LETTERS FROM READERS

THE gripers are out in full force as usual, only faintly leavening with praise. But on the whole, the tone seems to be friendlier than usual, although too many of the mis-sivists are still rating stories in jugs of Xeno for which the Sarge will allow himself one faint sigh.

Is there something mildly fishy about this first note?

HE HADDOCK CORRESPOND

By Alfred Halibut

Dear Sarge: I have broken my lifelong pledge of never writing letters to old broken-down magazine editors. But seeing "what fools we mortals be", I have done it only to insert a few kind words about the Summer issue of TWS. However, it is far from perfect, so don't start celebrating.

I enjoyed DEAD CITY and TITAN OF THE JUNGLE, although I still am figuring out THE ICE WORLD. I found TWILIGHT PLANET quite good. As for the rest, I can write better ones myself. (Why don't you, Al? —S.S.)

Your covers are improving. But why has there got to be a female on each cover of your infamous TWS? Guess I'm just prejudiced against women. But with all your good and bad points, I always manage to get every issue of TWS.—Montreal, Canada.

All in all, a well-intentioned letter—or perhaps Hell is paved not with good intentions but with Halibut. Serious new tone or no, the Sarge is still puzzled by the vast amount of woman-haters who seem to delight in bursting into hymns of Bergey-hate. Perhaps the species is going to walk on halibut or good intentions or something. It seems more than mildly alarming.

RIGHT OFF THE BOAT

By Ralph D. Comer

Dear Sarge: The time arrives when I must needs drop a line to you and (I'm hoping) to the slap-happy bunch of characters whose names I invariably find in the Vox Populi of your mag.

While my ship sits here in drydock I am pushing myself further toward drooling imbecility by lower-

ing my shield and standing forth for some of the institutions I have long associated with stf fan letters to magazines.

I am always happy to have the author of the letter set down the titles of the stories in the previous issue or issues in the order in which he or she liked them. Therefore—

SUMMER ISSUE, 1946

Dead City—Leinster—Aged plot, well handled, groovy illustrations.

Twilight Planet—Cross—This I liked (I can never find any reason for liking anything, or rather I'd rather not take time finding logical bases for my subjective judgments).

The Ice World—Rocklynnne

Forever is Today—Ksanda

Zero—Loomis

Titan of the Jungle—Coblentz

The last four are rather typical of the stuff stf mags have been giving out with the last few years—definitely mediocre (polite term).

Now to say a bit about the illustrations—another fine situation—

I like the illustrations in TWS on the whole in the issue previously mentioned. The illustrations in Dead City and Zero rate tops with me. I also like the style of the illustration in Twilight Planet.

About the covers—I too feel constrained to conceal the mag in public. I have forced myself to brazenly carry TWS away from newsstands while feeling sales-girls' eyes staring wonderingly after me as if they were thinking, "What sort of guy is that to read magazines with such lurid covers?"

Well, ya can't win 'em all and I really do enjoy the visions one occasionally finds on the covers of TWS. Let 'em stay—I have become hardened to the accusing glances of them what's never even smelled the cork from a Xeno jug.

Since this is my first letter to a stf readers' column let me spread a little background for myself. I have been reading stf mags omniverously since 1940 and have found the mags I enjoyed most in second-hand shops—the best stories seem to have been written in eras before I first discovered stf. Reading over the above statement I am constrained to change it to, "There were more good stories per mag in them thar days."

Sarge! Please do not plaster any more gruesome nightmares—said to be portraits of your little band of informed ones. They have shattered the rosy image I had cooked up of you.

I send forth a plea to the Joes who are regular contributors of The Reader Speaks—You fellows who write letters with thought contained in them, write more each month, as I read The Reader Speaks (the "month" is wishful thinking).

I hope to find one of you has contributed something worth reading—but until you do I shall content myself with the wordy epistles of Brothers Kennedy and Oliver and Sister Cunningham (?).—S. S. Helena Modjeska, c/o Williams, Diamond, 262 California, San Francisco, California.

Thanks, Ralph, you seem to have done a little thinking yourself. Glad you liked Leinster's DEAD CITY—we did ourselves, of course. As for your opinion of the short stories, we do the best we can with what we are able to persuade the current aces of stf to submit.

On the subject of letters from readers to this column, it appears to take all kinds—and we certainly get 'em. Drop us another line when you find the time and the impulse overcomes you. We'll find space for it if it's as good as the above.

UNFAINT PRAISE

By Alan D. Jones

Sarge: Effusive, multitudinous, and hasty congratulations. At last—after brow-beating, threats, pleadings, [Turn page]

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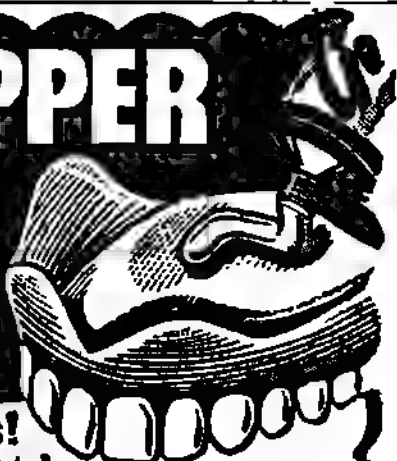
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and expressions of disgust and open rebellion—TWS⁷ has given us an ish that doesn't have a cover with a next-to-naked girl as the main feature. True, there is a fair specimen there, but it doesn't take up the whole cover. Shall we say, "A new step in STF mag covers" has been taken? It's even good for artistic accuracy. Give Bergey a bouquet of (four) roses.

Now, I turn with a fond sigh to the mag's meat—the stories. In order, the things go—

1. *Twilight Planet*—ah, Cross, my hero! The best I've read in my short STF history. Give the man 12 jugs of Xeno, but don't let it affect his writing. I want more of it. (The writing, that is.)

2. *Forever is Today*—Very good stuff. Give him 10 jugs, and congratulate Ksanda for a story which was excellent without having any outstanding parts in it.

3. *Dead City*—Ten jugs also. Some of Leinster's best, but a rather impossible sequence in the time-theory.

4. *Titan of the Jungle*—9 jugs. A darn good story, to be considered excellent because it is not on a really scientific basis and still is so interesting.

5. *Zero*—8 jugs and a quart. Who, for a neophyte's info, is Loomis? Great stuff, this absolute. But someone sent an electric current around a steel ring which was at 1/3 or so from absolute, and the current took 3 weeks (approx.) to stop after the source of the current had been cut off. If the electrons were perfectly stationary, why does the electricity continue? (Theory is, that at absolute, the current would keep going and attain perpetual motion.)

6. *Ice World*—I hate to place this last, but it is very slightly less meritorious than "Zero." Give them 8 jugs and a quart. Lots of literary descriptive merit here. It had wonderful emotional portrayal.

We even had good letters this ish. Chad and Kennedy are in top form. Where did les femmes come from, Sarge? Maybe they have been ST Fans longer than I, but I'm a woman-hater, anyway.—1242 Prairie Avenue, Lawrence, Kansas.

The Sarge is beginning to regret have mounted the water wagon after that young inland sea of Xeno you wished upon him, Alan. Thanks again—and again.

If you don't know Noel Loomis, you are a neophyte. Some of his works for TWS and its companion mag, *STARTLING STORIES*, are rated as all-time classics. Dig up *IRON MEN* or *CITY OF GLASS* if you doubt this. Suffice it to say, he is an old and master hand at turning out stf fiction, whose recent output is still suffering from an overdose of war work.

As to where did les femmes come from, what the Sarge wants to know is where did they go? Not a letter from a femme fan in a singularly mountainous pile of mail this time out. And the Sarge is *not* a woman hater in any sense of the word. So come back, you Chloes, get out of that swamp and onto paper.

Well, Alan, if you like Chad Oliver, here goes—

CHADRACK
By Chad Oliver

Dear Sarge: The heaving bed of greenish slush into which Kennedy, yours truly, and Ye Sarge were thrust by Mr. Storer in his charming letter bubbles warningly to the surrounding jungle. Wild beasts tremble and slink away. Birds cease their songs. Monkeys suddenly are stilled. Even Titan, the ape, quits carving "I hate humans" on the trees. The word is passed through the jungle with uncanny speed—**OLIVER'S COMING OUT!**

Splat! The surface of the bubbling morass is broken as a rugged, handsome figure emerges from its clutches like a bullet. Up and up he soars, and on and on—suspiciously like Superman. (Could I be sued?) Never pausing, he presses on until he is seated behind

[Turn to page 102]

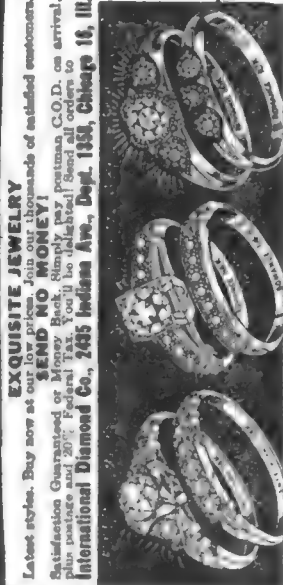
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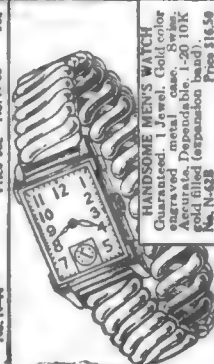
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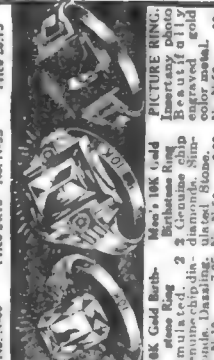
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his typewriter, with the Summer TWS propped up in front of his X-ray eyes.

He writes—and lo! Another letter is created. Eh? I should have stayed in the jungle? How unkind. Sarge. Oh well. (Frightfully original remark, what?)

Stanton A. Coblenz's *Titan of the Jungle* was, I am sorry to say, about the silliest story that I have read in many an eon. I usually enjoy Mr. Coblenz, but this read like a comic-book serial. And a poor comic-book, at that. I offer a possible explanation—perhaps Titan wrote this and signed Stanton's name to the manuscript. Great heavens, maybe it's Coblenz who's imprisoned in that jungle cage! Horrors!

Of the two novelets, Leinster again cops first place in TWS with *Dead City*. It had an interesting theme. It was well-plotted, and the writing was first-rate—very plainly lacking in all the corny phrases inherent in the Coblenz yarn. (I understand that Coblenz is noted for his satires; perhaps that explains the triteness of *Titan of the Jungle*. Even so, it takes more than bad writing to produce good satire.) Ross Rocklynne, in *The Ice World*, has nothing startling to offer—it was competent, period.

The shorts were pretty much of the So-What? variety, although Cross' *Twilight Planet* was fairly good. Art? Well, the illustrations were okay except for Lawrence and Marchion. Lawrence—oops, I mean Stevens, don't I?—was better than okay and Marchion, of course, is in a class by himself. Who else can make human beings out of linoleum? Who else has yet to master perspective? Who save Marchion can be so consistently incompetent? Sorry, Sarge, but the man can't draw.

Brother Bergey is in familiar form on *Ye Blotch on Ye Cover*. Tell me, Mr. Bergey—do you ever have bad dreams?

The Reader Speaks was sprightly and gay this trip. Lesser, Kennedy, Trucano . . . things are looking up in the Critic's Corner. Not to mention Friend Norman Storer. You are right, Norman. Chad Oliver does write fine letters. How lucky Sergeant Saturn is to receive so many of them. O fortunate man. . .

With merely a protesting gurgle or two from the slush bed, our hero reluctantly fades from view.—1311-25th Street, Galveston, Texas.

The Sarge is plagued by a horrible sensation that he has used this CHADRACK business before to head an Oliver letter, but faint research fails to disclose it. If the worst be true, anyone annoyed may use any other title that comes into his or her head.

For the rest, poor Marchion has probably taken to his bed in a vengeful chill, while Bergey remains impervious. Incidentally, those who believe him capable of drawing only Rube Goldberg brassieres should take a look at some of his covers for our sports and football magazines. The gentleman is truly good.

With this, Lucky Sergeant Saturn signs off on Oliver and turns to—

CHAD'S FRIEND SPEAKS

By Garvin Berry

Dear Sarge: Speaking of monstrosities, I just finished Summer '46 TWS and shall forthright tell you how to run the mag.

TITAN OF THE JUNGLE rates as the newest low in Coblenz's busy career of plumbing the depths of stf. Yarn has so many absurdities that I suspect Titan "ghosted" it for SAC. To wit: 1) honeymooners seeking a little-er-rest in the romantic depths of a sweltering disease-infested dangerous Gold Coast jungle; 2) the inexplicable workings of the mysterious Fluid of Enlightenment—a Fearlike name which works with equal ability and celerity upon anything from quetzals to humans; 3) Gold Coast natives filling fire extinguishers with nitric acid; 4) Titan's learning such gibberish as "Ugh! Me Titan. Me kill man-beast." from a presumably literate scientist—shades of Lord Greystoke!; 5) the mys-HEY! Wartle! Come up outa that Xeno jug 'n' listen to me. Oh, all right, I'll make it short.

For years I've been hearing about SAC's wonderful satire, of which this appears to be typical. The only humor—satirical or otherwise—that I can see is in the good laugh Coblentz must have at the gullibility of fans who swallow this stf parody.

DEAD CITY was the only good yarn this issue, as compared to 4 passable ones last time. Leinster can take a couple of pages of interesting literate story from something like the 4-dimensional art or the queer knife that the average author would whizz over with a couple of variations of "Gad! What a deucedly strange artifact I, Wendy Transom, have unearthed!" Like to see a Leinster novel.

Rest of the yarns just barely readable, nothing more. Rocklynnne is way off the beam with ICE WORLD. TWILIGHT PLANET is typical Polton which always makes me Cross. Best thing about ZERO was the Bryd who could stand a short story of his own in the future—even if he does bear a striking resemblance to a Van Vogt monster with a sweeter disposition. Incidentally I, Garvin Berry, do hereby assure Noel Loomis that from my vast knowledge of science culled from countless comic books it is not possible to find absolute zero on the surface of a planet under natural conditions. Ksanda has not yet equalled his amateur effort, HADES, of some years ago—and won't as long as he sticks to trite plots like FOREVER IS TODAY. I think he did it all on the strength of that circle of time idea, which isn't new or strong enough to carry the yarn.

Pix average with exception of Stevens, Lawrence, Dore, Raphael, or whoever that fellow is who did LOST CITY.

Now for a little social note. Oh, stop polishing your ears; it's not about a girl. I was in Galveston a day or two, and I went by to meet Chad Oliver, he of the "keen mind" "whose comments are always interesting"—quotes from a Chad Oliver letter.

I was indeed surprised to find that he had described himself beautifully. I spent an entire afternoon in a fascinating discussion of fantasy past, present, and future; we did our best to sear authors and editors' ears the country o'er. The only flaw I found in this otherwise sterling character (Stop blushing, Chad. You can do the same for me sometime.) was a rather psychopathic liking for Sgt. Saturn. Slight pause for a gasp of horror. He even assured me that "it would grow on me"—like warts doubtless. Rest assured though, I shall fight any such unnatural feeling to the death.—1107 Fugate St., Houston, Texas.

A man of strong opinions is our Garvin evidently. Well, at any rate, we are happy that he liked Leinster and Stevens. Which is a little like the famous misprint in a Colorado paper years ago which, in describing an automobile accident, stated, "Two of Miss So-and-so's injuries were mortal, but her friends will be glad to learn that the others were not serious."

HIGHLAND AVENUE FLING

By Ron Anger

Dear Sarge: Summer ish very good. Ahem! Hrmpff! Leinster, Loomis, Ksanda great. Cover putrid.

W. Robert Gibson for Gibson P. 6 was good.

D. Donnell for Coblentz P. 13 is poor; on P. 15, fair and on P. 19, good.

Unknown artist's cut on P. 42 great.

Stevens for Leinster, P. 43, 44 and 49, is the pinnacle of stf art.

Unknown for Cross P. 63 is awful.

Unknown artist's cut P. 71, neat.

Marchioni for Rocklynnne, P. 73, poor.

Stevens (?) for Loomis, P. 84, magnificent!

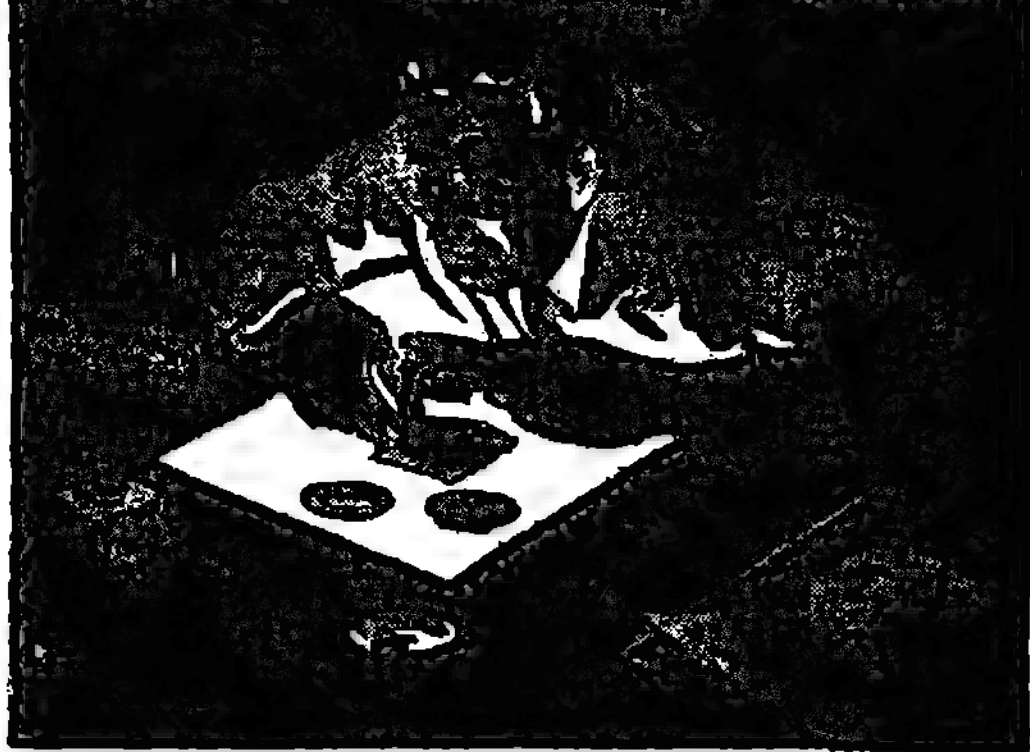
Unknown artist's cut P. 91, neater still.

Marchioni for Ksanda, P. 92, exceptionally accurate and clear picturization which really clarifies the story—unusual for an average stf pic.

Sarge, you've really got me stymied over this Stevens-Lawrence-Lawrence, Jr. (or is it Stevens Jr.) mix-up. You say Stevens "has signed some of his work under the Lawrence pseudonym. At times to

[Turn page]

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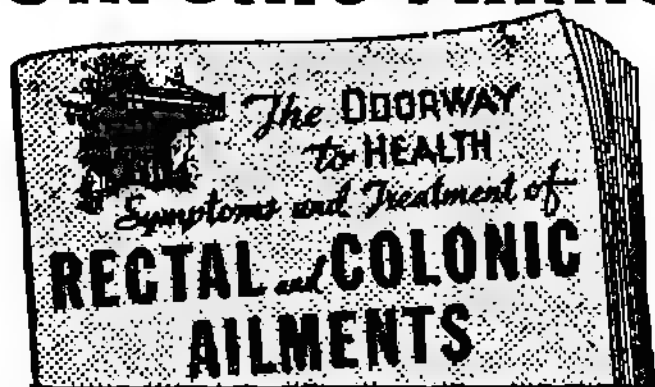
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avoid confusion with a son who is also an illustrator." Am I to take from that that all illustrations signed Lawrence in other mags are really by Stevens? And what about this son? How does he sign his work? And where? And when? And why? And . . . see what I mean?

Sarge, can I comment on TRS? Oh, thank you, Sarge! Thank you! Thank you!

W. Robert Gibson's pic has already been commented on. His letter was interesting. I, too, am waiting anxiously for his reactions to *Things Pass By* and *Sword of Tomorrow*. High on my list would also be *The World-Thinker* by Jack Vance, *Forgotten World* by Edmond Hamilton, *Rocket Skin* by Ray Bradbury and *Dead City* by Leinster. SS contributes *The Hollow World* by Frank Belknap Long, *Incident on Calypso* by Murray Leinster, *The Forgotten Man of Space* by P. Schuyler Miller, *Twelve Hours to Live!* by Jack Williamson and *The Dead Planet* by Edmond Hamilton.

Speaking of Frank Belknap Long, I have seen some stories signed with a Jr. tacked on. Are there two F. B. L.s writing stf?

In the midst of TRS I pause to give a suggestion. The fan letters are always interesting and some are always brilliant, but strikes me something new in the letter columns would not be amiss. Anger has had an idea! Why not start a discussion about what each fan thinks are the best stories by a certain author? Would be interesting, would bring back nostalgic memories and would be an unexcelled way to blow off about your personal opinions which every fan dearly loves!

Unfortunately, (or fortunately—it all depends where you're sitting) I'm not really qualified to nominate my choices because, through a truly great masterpiece of bureaucratic thinking, I've been unable to read almost all the wartime issues of, not only TWS, but the majority of the promags. However with this reservation in mind, I'll start the ball rolling by nominating a story in this issue, *Zero*, as my favorite story by Noel Loomis. That should stir up some comment, eh Sarge!

With extreme reference to the above-described lamentable predicament of this poor stfan, I would do almost anything (including sending you lotsa money) if you could dig up any issues of TWS before Summer, 1945 or SS before Summer 45 from your back issue files. Cap Futures of any date will also be welcomed with open arms.

Chad Oliver has the best letter in TRS. Joke second. Norman L. Storer third.

Just in case you've forgotten, the Summer ish was very good.—520 Highland Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario.

Sorry, Ronald, but the TWS and SS back files have been depleted to the point of famine and cannot be dished out for love and/or money. As for your other requests, there is only one Frank Belknap Long in stf fiction. He dropped the Junior from his name some years ago after his father died. And Lawrence is Stevens. His son is a cover artist (non-stf) of considerable repute according to the art department. Which may help you a little.

As for your idea on favorite stories by favorite authors, go to it—it's still a honey. Hope you can stir up some more reader interest as the Sarge must necessarily sit on the sidelines perched atop an ivory tennis-referee's chair.

POLL FROM PALM SPRINGS

By Rick Sneary

Dear Sarge: Well the mag's still too short and too thin, but you are better. The stories this time were almost like those of the days before the war. You have turned out an issue at last, in which I enjoyed all the stories. Something I haven't been able to say before.

I throw you a new way of rating too. Stories listed

in order I liked them. The points for (in this order) probability, humanness of characters and writing.

1. Dead City	5.00	8.50	8.00
2. Titan of the Jungle.....	3.05	5.00	4.50
3. Twilight Planet	8.00	5.00	6.50
4. Zero	4.00	3.00	5.00
5. Forever is Today.....	3.00	3.00	6.00
6. The Ice World.....	.05	2.04	3.50

"Dead City" will rate the Hall of Fame in SS more than some you have been using. I don't understand my not liking Rocklynne's story. I usually go for the stuff.

The Reader Speaks was the best in some time. Some of the old gang finally wrote you.

Say, you got any news on your annual? Don't suppose it will be out for a while. Please don't reprint stuff tho. To the old fans it's a bore, and the non-fans don't know the diff. If you make it big enough I'd be willing to sink 30c in it.

And say, how about bringing back the Science Questions and Answers? They were swell. Only one of your features I missed. You will note there are no remarks about the cover. I'm worn down to the point where I don't give a . . .

So with that I leave you.—2962 Santa Ana Street, South Gate, California.

Just a moment, Rick—who is editing TWS, you or the Sarge? At present, we have no plans for an annual issue, reprint or otherwise. It's hard enough to keep the regular editions up to par these days, much less to shoot for eagles.

However, we liked your new rating system, though your terms, "Probability, humanness of characters and writing," are a trifle ambiguous in sense if not in purpose. May we take the liberty of substituting "plausibility, characterization and style?" They seem a trifle more to the point etymologically speaking. Keep it up.

As for the Science Questions and Answers, you can dish us up your own if your feel so inclined. At least then you would know the answers, which is more than the Sarge does. Next. . .

THOTS(?) FROM DURHAM

By Benson "Boff" Perry

Dear Sarge: As our thots turn to the latest TWS ("our" is an editorial influence) and its increasing appearance, we hope that the quality of material won't be affected. Adversely, that is.

"Titan of the Jungle" was a fairly well done story with Coblenz's usual satire. It certainly doesn't compare with some of his past stories, tho. If it hasn't already been done, I'd like to see his "The Making of Misty Isle" reprinted in *Startling*.

Best thing in the issue was Leinster's "Dead City." I suspect this will be remembered for quite a while.

"Twilight" added more to my increasing disappointment in Fearn. Is this just a temporary rut or what? Two years ago, he used to print the best stuff in either TWS or SS.

In the art field, Lawrence continues to be tops. And Sarge, what's this slander about that not being his real name? Have I been misled all these years. Gad, my basic concepts are being shattered!

Good old Bergey: Now we have the heroine ready to club the BEM. This is indeed an innovation. Oh yes, speaking of caricatures of your royal person, permit me to praise the one on the contents page.—Durham, New Hampshire.

And why shouldn't a BEM be bushwhacked once in an eon for variety's sake? For the rest, thanks, and we shall check on "Misty" [Turn page]

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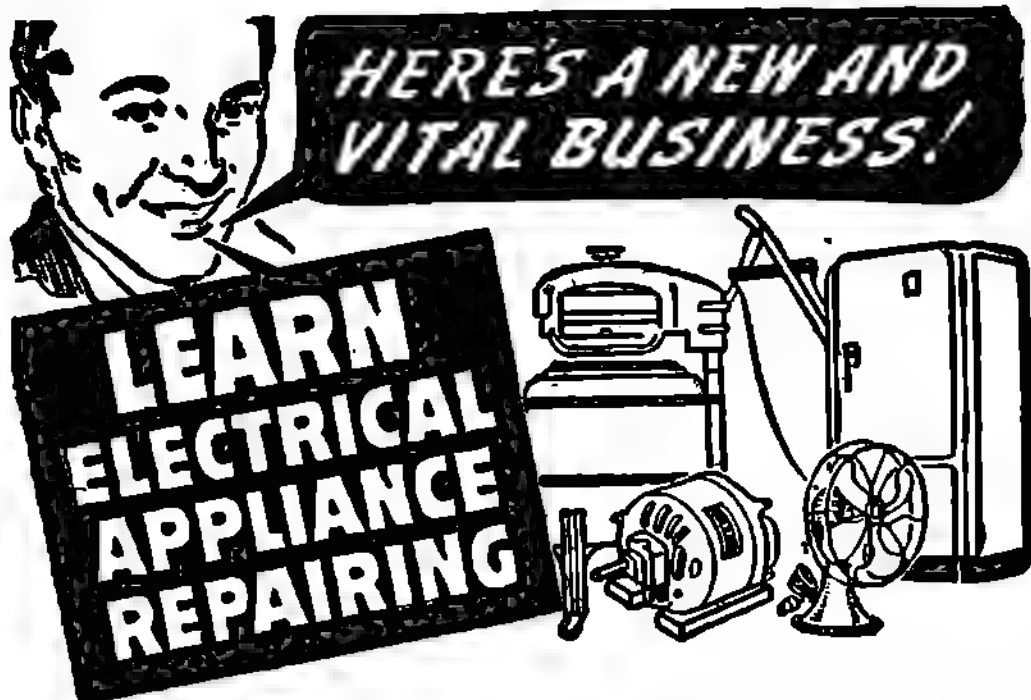
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Isle" to see what can be done if anything about a reprint. As for your appreciation of Verne S. Stevens, we concur heartily. And why is his use of the Lawrence pseudonym basic-concept shattering? Let us know, please.

PEARLS FROM SEARLES

By Bill Searles

Dear Sixth Planet (not counting Asteroidi): I'm sorta new at this stuff, but here goes. I've only been reading science-fiction since this past winter. But so far, Thrilling Wonder and Startling Stories are among the best. You get more for less, as the saying goes.

Here's some advice to T.W.S.: Never change. Your novels are just long enough. You have just enough short stories. Your illustrations are swell. I like your covers. From all those letters, gripe, gripe, gripe, I guess I'm crazy. I don't care. I still like you.

Now let's start looking at the summer issue. Boy, it is swell. The stories all were wonderful. Here's how I rate them—

4 jugs of Xeno—Dead City.

3½ jugs of Xeno—Twilight Planet.

3 jugs of Xeno—The rest were tied.

A friend of mine has been lending me some Captain Futures. I wish you would bring him back. In the last issue I noticed they were all saying Capt. Future was the best magazine.

Oh, yes, in case you think this letter is sort of kiddish, I'm only twelve years old. I'm not kidding.—220 Almeria Road, West Palm Beach, Fla.

P.S. What are B.E.M.S.?

So you liked our Summer Issue? Well, better things lie ahead, so there is still hope, MASTER William. Cap Future will continue to appear in SS from time to time. For the benefit of other late-comers to the field, a BEM, or B.E.M. as you so neatly put it, is a Bug-eyed Monster, beloved of all Bergey cover fans. Comprenhez?

MORE ABOUT BEMS

By Lin Carter

Dear Sarge: So it's BEMS again, huh? Back in the old rut, huh? And this time on the cover of TWS, huh? Galloping Gruzaks, Sarge! Are these bleary orbs deceiving me or sumthing?? An' ape!! What's wrong with extra-terrestrial BEMS that we've got to go back to earth animals? On the other hand, what's GOOD about extra-terrestrial BEMS?

"The Reader Speaks" was magnif this time, JoKennedy, Chad Oliver, Guy Trucano, Jr., and Milt Lesser—more! Also a missive from newfan Norman W. Storer . . . let's hear more from him.

Now for the big (ah say, big) surprise, Sarge! I'm gonna rate the stories! Gad, what a surprise, huh? The fans seem to just write in to pan covers (I should talk), trimmed edges, or the fact that your art work is lousy, so I'm gonna be different!

TITAN OF THE JUNGLE—8

A swell story from the old master. Where you been hidin' yourself, Stanton?

DEAD CITY—10.

Let's have Leinster do a full-length novel soon. Stevens, by the way, is almost as good as Finlay in detail.

THE ICE WORLD—6.

What a title! Why not "The World of Ice" or "Dying World?" A fairly good story but awful pic! I HATE Marchioni!

TWILIGHT PLANET—7.

Fair.

ZERO—4.

(Should have been rated higher).

FOREVER IS TODAY—2.

Ugh!

By the way, Sarge, when are we going to get some

more by Ed. Hamilton? "Old world-saver" was really hitting on all eight with FORGOTTEN WORLD, and when will Capt. Future come back?

So Finlay will be back in the next ish, huh? What else could a fan ask for?

And while we're on the subject of inside art, what ever happened to Wesso?

Well, my pencil has worn down to a stub and since I'm all out of ideas (wipe that grin off your face!) I might as well wish you Clear Ether. But before I do I'd like to start the SFTPOFLGOCOSFM (Society For The Prevention Of Fiendish-Looking Ghouls On Covers Of Science Fiction Magazines). To become a member merely follow these simple directions: Tear off the top of your head and mail it with 15c or one copy of TWS to the station to which you are listening and receive a gold-plated Xeno jug and hand-carved membership card.—865, 20th Ave., S., St. Petersburg, Florida.

No comment except to wish bad cess to your SFTPOFLGOCOSFM. As to the fate of Wesso, nobody around here seems to know.

UNMERCIFUL PROVIDENCE

By Jack Wells

Dear Sarge: Well, here I am again. This time I'm not going to complain about the cover because you won't change it anyway. All I can say is Ugh! The summer ish was fair but not up to your usual standards. If you ever let another story like "Titan of the Jungle" in your mag I'll get a subscription to Good Housekeeping. It was horrible!

The stories ran as follows.

"Zero"	10 jugs. Excellent.
"Twilight Planet"	8 jugs. Pretty fair.
"Dead City"	7 jugs. At first it was poor but the ending brought up its rating.

"Forever is Today"	7 jugs. Well written but not enough plot.
--------------------	---

"The Ice World"	5 jugs. Clever ending but rotten the rest of the way.
-----------------	---

"Titan of the Jungle"	1 very diluted drop. This is an insult to real stf. fans.
-----------------------	---

"The Reader Speaks" was fair, and the inside illustrations were O.K. The Fall Issue appears to be pretty good according to the previews, and as I liked Fearn's "Aftermath" I'll be looking forward to his "Multillionth Chance." I trust Leinster will make a hit with "Pocket Universes" and be up to his usual standards.

Honestly, for all the complaining I do, I really like your magazine and am looking forward to the next issue with bated breath.—275 Olney Street, Providence, Rhode Island.

Perhaps in your next missive, Jack, you will define for the Sarge and his cohorts exactly what a real stf fan is. Since it seems to be about as easy to fence in as, say, Americanism, about which each of us has his own pet views, it should give rise to considerable reader ruckus. At any rate, go to it. We'll crawl into our long disused bomb shelter and ride out the storm.

JEWETT JOTTINGS


By Tom Jewett

Dear Sarge: I just finished reading the summer issue of TWS, and when I stopped shuddering, I sat down at my typewriter and am now writing you a poison pen letter. You know why. I shall enumerate.

TITAN OF THE JUNGLE. This is positively, absolutely, without a doubt the worst story, by a rather well-known author that is, that has ever been glowered at in TWS. Maybe I'm only a self-styled critic, but I know what I like, and it isn't tripe like that. The characters were shadowless, they just didn't live. The plot was okay, but you can't make a good story out of a plot alone.

[Turn page]

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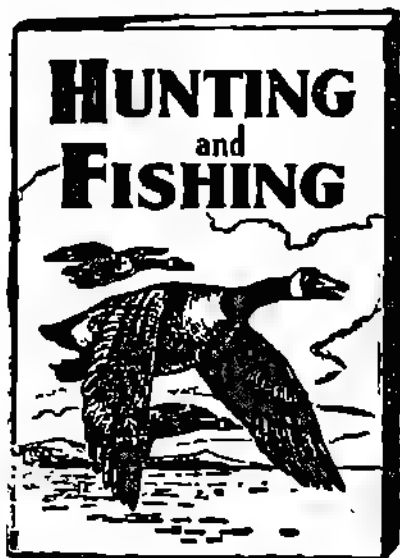
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Marchioni. Page 72-73. If you can call that a good
drawing, good enough for TWS, either you are blind
or don't think much of the mag. He can't even draw
a convincing BEM!

Enough mud-slinging, here's a few bouquets (I think
that's how you spell it).

By the well-known racetrack system, here are my
ratings:

DEAD CITY. This isn't the best story I've seen in
TWS, and it isn't the best I've seen of Leinster, but
it is good—darn good. Lost or dead civilizations get
me, I like 'em. One question. They must have known
their race would die out if they saw the city. Why
didn't they go forward in time with a lot of them
and start over again? But I guess in that case there
wouldn't have been any story. Right? It WINS any-
how.

"TWILIGHT PLANET". Very thought-provoking
story.

In show place is **ZERO.** That Bryd was a nice guy.
Really helped them out, didn't he. Incidentally, is it
spelled 'B-R-Y-D' or 'B-Y-R-D'. There were both in
the story. Typographical error?

The best pic was the one by Stevens-Lawrence on
page 84. His others were good, too. Next was by
Thomas (?) on page 63, though it does look as if
she's collapsing all over his control board.

D. Donnell's was fair. Not bad, but not too too
good.

Cover. It was unique because it almost followed the
story. Oh well, good cover, bad story. Bad cover,
good story. That's the way it seems from this side
of the dark glasses anyway.

All in all, this issue was nothing to brag about.

Well, wotta ya know, I forgot the letter dept. Gib-
son's drawing was veddy good. Did you have to photo
the pic? Can't tell what technique he used, but it
sure looks realistic. If that's you, my nightmares are
getting better all the time.

Chad Oliver's letter was distinctive, if nothing else.

Norm Storer had a nice letter. (All right, Fiend,
((pant-pant)) I said it. Put down that Q-ray gun
now!) Ah yes, next time I write him I will enclose
one atomic bomb. That cutie across the page from
his letter he won't like. Oh well, we're all slightly
nuts over some things. I should have such luck!

Well, I've used up my day's ration of typewriter
ribbon, so farewell, Sargey ole cuss. Get rid of all
your visiphone slugs. Or as they say in Schlubgollia,
get the lead out.—670 George Street, Clyde, Ohio.

Too bad about your typewriter-ribbon ra-
tion or you might have gone on and used up
the Sarge. It was supposed to be Bryd, not
Byrd, in **ZERO**, and do learn how to spell
bouquet. We love 'em.

Well, that's the round-up of printable and
more-or-less logical letters for this issue.
Those of you whose letters were not printed,
thanks and keep on trying. If the Sarge may
make a humble suggestion, however, to all
of you experts, why limit yourselves entirely
to criticism of the magazine, pro or con?
Surely some of you must have more inter-
esting or controversial thoughts on subjects
dear to all stf hearts.

If you have any, let's see them in writing,
and we'll give you all the play they rate.
Since leaving the Xeno alone the Sarge is
spoiling for a bang-up argument in his col-
umns. So long for a couple of months.

—SERGEANT SATURN.

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THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

HENRY KUTTNER, whose remarks anent his I AM EDEN are quoted immediately below, is certainly one of the finest science fiction authors extant. Furthermore, when it comes to fantasy, he has as much right to



wear the mantles of the late A. Merritt and H. P. Lovecraft as any man now writing.

In I AM EDEN, it seems to us that he has combined both fantasy and pseudo science to a remarkable degree, because truly these two major elements of all wonder stories have been becoming stranger and stranger story-fellows under the exigencies of modern scientific development.

But anent his fine story, Mr. Kuttner speaks as follows:

Humans have a precarious grip on the planet's surface. A split atom, running amuck, could very easily cause considerable damage. It's one chance in a good many million—at least—that a world like this could exist, with conditions favorable to human evolution. And it wouldn't take much to destroy the entire race.

Stories have been written in which intelligent ants, spiders, lobsters, whales, kangaroos, crystalline life, gaseous life, sentiment critters of pure energy, aqueous life and large, belligerent conifers have put Man on the ropes, begging somebody to throw in the sponge.

Now I couldn't write a story in which ants became the dominant species, for I rather think they *are* dominant—we haven't encroached enough on their culture to be a nuisance. The late, great H. G. Wells once wrote a corker of a yarn about South American ants starting a blitz, but the closest I ever got to it was a story in which rabbits attempted to conquer.

This was so obviously a case of jumping out of the frying pan into the fire that I can't remember whether or not I ever finished it. I hope I didn't, for Mr. Thurber did it much better in a cartoon showing a worried patient staring at a rabbit-headed psychiatrist who was saying, "How do you mean, people look like rabbits to you, Mrs. Snork?"

I seem to have wandered a good bit afield from the subject, which seems to be the Story Behind the Story of I AM EDEN. There *isn't* any story behind it. There's one slightly to the left, and up a ways, but

[Turn page]

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My own idea, for what it's worth, is that Man is incurably anthropomorphic in his thinking, and automatically translates the alien into familiar terms. I cavil at that, even sitting right here at my typewriter.

To reverse the phrase, nothing alien is human, or remotely human. It so happened that Man, a bunch of animal cells, got a head start here, but the life-factor is certainly not limited to animal or vegetable, nor is intelligence limited to the animal kingdom.

Only now are we beginning to open doors that show us how unfathomably vast are the distances beyond—macrocosmic and microcosmic—and, when eventually space travel is developed, it's likely that some rather shocking things will be found on other worlds. Shocking only by human standards, because of their pure alienage.

Pilate asked, "What is truth?" The question behind I AM EDEN might be phrased, "What is life?"

It's a question that can't be answered offhand too easily. Which, perhaps, is why I wrote this story.

Hope you like it!

Oddly enough, Jack Vance, who is newer to professional writing than Mr. Kuttner, is equally pre-occupied with the anthropomorphic concept of humanity. Perhaps this is indicative of a trend—we wouldn't know. But Mr. Vance, whose career to date is one of infinite promise when he can get at a typewriter between ocean voyages, has attacked the problem of the utterly alien from a very different slant.

Says he:

RE *Phalid's Fate*, and the story behind, I go metaphysical, and ask the question, what is the nature of love? Procreative instinct, more or less sublimated, or, at the other extreme, perfect congruence of a pair of psyches? No doubt all gradations show up at the marriage license bureau.

Phalid's Fate however concerns itself with idealistic love in its limiting case—where one protagonist wears a non-terrestrial body, and where, consequently, the reproductive-drive basis is completely nullified.

Both lovers necessarily are equipped with human brains, by very definition of the word. "Love," like "evil", "patriotism", "religion" and "fashion", is strictly an anthropomorphic concept—or perhaps better to say, a mind-cast of the warm-blooded vertebrates most highly developed in man.

Thus forms of life reproducing other than bisexually living under a non-earthly environment, could no more fathom human "love" than men can understand the urge which drives a Phalid into the Forest of Life and oblivion.

Effectively describing these other-world emotions is of course near-impossible—say impossible—for the reason that man evolved his abstract language to describe Man. His abstract terms are very complex, very highly specialized, with peculiar human connotations.

Referring to other-world life even in generalities like "necessity", "intent" or "excitement" it's about like trying to use a microscope as a carpet-sweeper. It seems to me that the best a completely honest, completely consistent author can do is to hint at the empathies flickering deep dark down in his imagination, hoping to prod his readers into like conjecture. If he is awkward or too vague the story suffers. So we compromise. Or that's what I call it anyway.

Clearly it's somewhat easier to describe the reaction of a man's brain to impressions of alien sense-organs—since the reactions are felt by a human intelligence, and consequently can theoretically, at least, be expressed in terms intelligible to other men.

(Concluded on page 112)

Science Fiction BOOK REVIEW

FOR too many years, lovers of science fiction have bemoaned the fact that the finest novels in this neo-fantastic category enjoy only the limited ephemeral existence allowed them by magazine publication. No matter how magnificent the author's concept or how learned and ingenious his development, book publishers have steadfastly refused to give his product the permanence of binding.

There have been a few exceptions, of course, notably H. G. Wells, H. P. Lovecraft and Lord Dunsany. But both Wells and Dunsany had achieved such renown in heavyweight or dramatic literature that the publishers felt entirely safe in printing anything they chose to write, while Lovecraft actually belonged, with Merritt, in the field of fantasy rather than sf.

To remedy this situation, a group of active devotees of science fiction has recently formed a publishing company, originally entitled the Buffalo Book Company, presently Hadley Publishing Company, at 271 Doyle Avenue, Providence, Rhode Island. As their inaugural effort, they have published in editions of 1,000 each at \$3.00 per copy **THE TIME STREAM** by John Taine and **THE SKYLARK OF SPACE** by Dr. Edward E. Smith.

There is little question in your reviewer's mind that Mr. Taine's story belongs in the realm of the minor classics. Serialized originally in 1931 in this magazine's forebear, **WONDER STORIES**, it is set (if such a story of shifting temporal dimensions can be "set" anywhere) in the San Francisco of 1906, immediately before the great earthquake or "fire" as chamber-of-commerce-conscious San Franciscans insist upon calling their greatest disaster.

It involves the efforts of a group of emissaries from a far distant time and planet (all of them living apparently normal existences on Earth) to prevent in our time the basic causes of the original sin in their own, that sin from which all of our current troubles supposedly stem.

[Turn page]

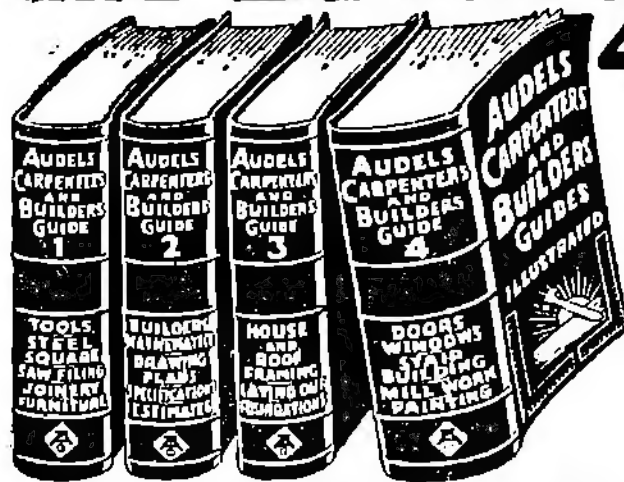
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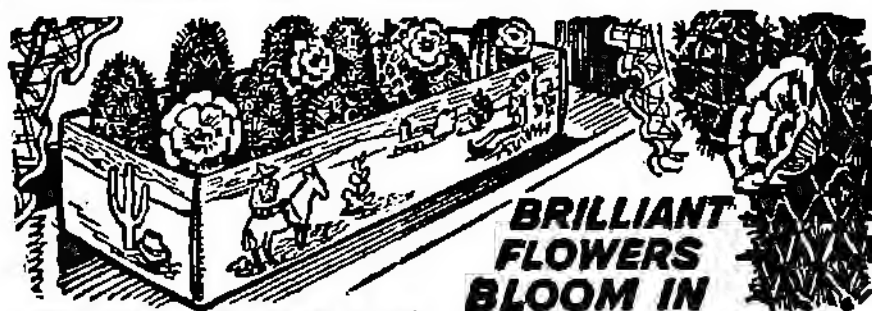
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Should this sound complex in retelling, perusal of the volume will reveal that Mr. Taine has made it perfectly clear in his beautifully written, stirring and always adult book.

THE TIME STREAM is a novel your critic is delighted to have read and probably should have read long since.

Dr. Smith's story is of more conventional mode, being primarily a tale of space travel and derring-do complete with Tellurian big-business complications, Oppenheim-esque intrigue and aerial warfare on a distant planet inhabited by humanoid types oddly primitive for their science (is that far wrong in light of what goes on here in the present?).

However, if the pseudo science is brilliantly presented, the whole tone of the book is juvenile and the dialogue, of the "bully-for-you" and "gee whiz" variety, a space anchor which causes the otherwise swift progress of the book to drag heavily at times. Good of its type.

Both volumes are beautifully printed and carefully edited and bound. We spotted but two minor typographicals in **THE TIME STREAM** and were only briefly puzzled by a single missing line in **SKYLARK**. This is a record that few of our better established publishing houses can match.

Hadley outlines an ambitious program if these first efforts sell as they should, including Taine's **THE FORBIDDEN GARDEN**, van Vogt's **THE WEAPON MAKERS** and a dozen or more other classics of this type. The new company deserves all the support science fiction lovers can give it.

—SERGEANT SATURN.

The Story Behind the Story

(Concluded from page 110)

The assumption that non-terrestrials would see, hear, feel, desire, to the same effect that men do is of course superficial, as is the idea that seeing, etc., is a necessary common denominator of all life-forms. On this basis I tentatively endowed the Phalids with a few alien modes of perception—but describing their impact on Ryan Wratch's brain became so diffuse and tedious that I gave it up as a bad job. Whether or not to good effect I'm still wondering.

And now, at the end, for **THE END**. Surely Murray Leinster, its author, needs no introduction in this department, especially to those readers who enjoyed his **POCKET UNIVERSES** in the Fall Issue, to which **THE END** is a sequel.

Mr. Leinster declaims thusly:

THE END is one of those things that start out more or less as a stunt and wind up as something else. I've read a lot of stories in which the universe is threatened with destruction. Sometimes I've wondered why nobody ever let it happen, so I started to write a yarn in which it would.

But I'd written another story, **POCKET UNIVERSES**, in which I hadn't said half of what I wanted to about warped space and its implications. Here was a chance to say it—and after all the end of a mere universe shouldn't mean the end of creatures like us, with our genius alike for exterminating each other and avoiding extermination! So there you are.

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- 2 **PLASTIC FLOORING.** May be made in any color or combination of colors. Gives a lifetime of wear. Dustproof. Soundproof. Verminproof. Resilient to the tread. Lay out solid from wall to wall or in pattern design of various shaped blocks.
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